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Ernst Schumacher: Brecht-Kritiken

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Exil in der Schweiz. Von Werner Mittenzwei. (Kunst und Literatur im antifaschistischen Exil, Band 2.) Leipzig: Reclam Verlag. 1978. 447 Seiten. 4, - M.

Mittenzwei's book forms part (to date, the best part) of what is planned to be a six-volume series on the German art and literature produced in exile during the Hitler era--more precisely, that art and literature which was consciously anti-fascist in character. Thus Mittenzwei describes the series as a contribution to an "Ästhetik des Widerstands." The motivation for this particular perspective is clearly to be found in the GDR's location of its own immediate roots in the tradition of the anti-fascist struggle. But given that Swiss asylum policy--harsher than that of any other country in Mittenzwei's view--denied refugees any involvement in political, i.e. anti-fascist activities on pain of Ausschaffung, Switzerland itself hardly provided fertile ground for the growth of socialist art and literature in exile. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Mittenzwei's account gives prominence to 'bourgeois' writers such as Thomas Mann, whose famous letter to Korrodi made him "Sprecher des gesamten antifaschistischen Exils," (172) and offers a (notably fair and even-handed) assessment even of 'difficult' and 'renegade' authors (e.g. Bloch, Silone). The book avoids the simplistic equation of anti-fascism with communism.

The declared primary aim is not the analysis of individual works but rather an investigation of the specific social, political and personal conditions under which anti-fascist art was produced. In less capable hands, this emphasis on the "Exilsituation" as opposed to "Exilliteratur" has been known to lead to mere uncritical Realienakkumulation, but Mittenzwei is rigorously selective (unlike the disjointed and ill-focused USA volume in the series) and presents a compressed, coherent overview of the main events, problems and persons involved without falling into the "Who's Who" trap which threatens any undertaking of this kind. Because of his first-hand familiarity with his material (he has talked extensively to many of those concerned and had full access to important archives in Switzerland and elsewhere--again, the USA volume is much inferior in this respect), Mittenzwei succeeds in communicating something of what it felt like to be a refugee in Switzerland. But perhaps the country-by-country approach adopted by the series could have been taken less literally, for it inhibits the author from making appropriate comparison with other countries where this would undoubtedly have helped to point to what was peculiar to the Swiss situation. It is less than satisfactory simply to give each volume a basically triadic structure (1. socio-political conditions; 2. main center of exile, with a historical account of the anti-fascist struggle; 3. principal literary and artistic achievements) and then to abandon the reader to his/her own comparative devices.

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Brecht-Kritiken. Von Ernst Schumacher. Berlin: Henschelverlag. 1977. 347 Seiten.

Among the Brecht critics Ernst Schumacher assumes a special place because he has credentials among scholars as well as journalists. He lived in the FRG for a number of years where he was active in the then-forbidden Communist party and eventually emigrated to the GDR. This volume represents largely a collection of reviews which Schumacher published between 1953 and 1976 in the Berliner Zeitung, Deutsche Woche, and Theater der Zeit. Thus, many of them are "occasional" pieces, obviously written under the pressure of time and full of political passions which are no longer particularly timely or interesting, such as his understandable contempt in the face of the FRG's boycott of Brecht after June 17, 1953. Many of the reviews could have been freed of other ballast.

The publisher's division of the book into chapters is not very convincing or practical. The different chapters deal with; 1. East Berlin productions by the Berliner Ensemble, the Volksbühne, or a drama school; 2. guest performances which GDR theaters produced in other countries; 3. guest performances of Brecht plays in Berlin by GDR theaters and foreign groups; 4. Brecht productions in German-speaking countries (including the famous performance of the Fatzer fragment by the Schaubühne in 1976); and finally, 5. memorial and theoretical articles. Since there is no usable table of contents, the reader is forced to hunt through the book. An appendix contains production teams and casts for the various performances discussed, but the publisher apologizes for the lack of reliability. In some cases the original programs were no longer available. Approximately fifty black-and-white pictures from performances and rehearsals round out the volume.

Schumacher is a good enough critic to make a collection of his reviews appropriate, but by far the most profound piece in this volume and apparently the only one not previously published, is a 33-page article on "Das Gestische in der darstellenden Kunst des Ostens und des Westens." Using the theater of China, Japan, and Bali as examples, Schumacher examines the effect of the language of gestures on such directors as Craig, Meyerhold, Tairov, Artaud, or Breck. He describes individual gestures, their functions, and the limitations of their effects. A good part of the essay is, of course, about the effect of Far Eastern theater on Brecht. Schumacher comes to the conclusion that the adaptation of the gesture or body language on the art of Western theater was largely unsuccessful or without consequence since Christian, capitalist or socialist theater has to rely primarily on the word to depict the individual and its unique traits. In fact, a Westernization of Far Eastern theater is taking place, especially in film and television. Schumacher's broad knowledge of facts and his command of theory in this article is impressive.

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