

The New Theatre Festival

An Editorial

The New Theatre Festival, held annually for the last four years (T62, T67), has become international. During nine days in June at Baltimore, seven theatre companies and solo performers from other countries joined twenty-three groups and individuals from this country to give nearly 200 performances. Most of the groups were not widely known. In choosing unknown companies for the festival, there was necessarily some risk, but risk is well worth taking when significant work is discovered; there were excellent productions by the American Contemporary Theatre (Buffalo), Soon 3 (San Francisco), Studio Scarabee (Holland), and Squat (originally from Hungary). The presentations of these four companies are documented in this issue.

The experimental theatre is healthier than some have feared if the variety of presentations seen at the festival is an accurate indication. The best productions escaped domination by the work of the important groups of the late 1960's and early 1970's, although some showed the impact of Grotowski, Schumann, the Open Theatre, the Performance Group, and Robert Wilson. Artaud and Brecht also continued their influence, but many of the new companies have gone beyond their training to make their own distinctive productions. The range of work at the festival was impressive and reflected the fact that there is no single direction for new theatre.

While the groups varied considerably in their intent, means, and style, none, with the exception of one improvisational group (Reality Theatre from Boston), was realistic. Blackbird Theatre (Tulsa, Oklahoma) and Mettawee Theatre (New York) used masks and puppets; the Drawing Legion (New York) posed volunteers, employed video and lectured directly to the audience. The Iowa Theatre Lab (Catskill, N.Y.) and Kuku Ryku Theatre Lab (New York) translated their own subjective biographical material into abstract images. Kraken (Baltimore), Time and Space Ltd. Theatre Company (New York) and Le Groupe Teatram (Quebec) confronted established texts, but all three gave special attention to movement. Theatre Lab West (Denver) and Theatre X (Milwaukee) were concerned with social issues—sexism and pollution—in their collectively created plays; Academy Theatre (Atlanta, Ga.), Living Stage (Washington, D.C.), and Dance Exchange (Washington, D.C.) usually work with community groups. South African Black '77 Theatre Project (Soweto, South Africa), Teatro Quatro (New York), and Theatre de l'Aquarium (Paris) presented political analyses developed for their own special constituency.

Among the solo performers were Krishnan Mambudir (New Delhi), who presented works from his Kathakali repertoire, Bob Carroll (San Francisco), who gave a song-and-dance Marxist analysis of capitalism in relation to the life cycle of the salmon, and Henri Gruvman (France), who combined realistic and surreal elements in his bizarre comedy.

The work of these groups developed out of specific contexts, sometimes for specific audiences. In part that is the strength of the work. But often, one suspects, groups geographically remote from other experimental work are struggling to develop what they assume are fresh concepts and methods when in fact they are reworking old ground. Provincialism, promoted by geographic isolation, is a particular problem in this country because of its size. In Europe, where the distance between major cities is less, theatre companies have devised touring circuits that include most of the countries of Western Europe. Such circuits, combined with the many festivals in both Western and Eastern Europe, result in groups coming to know each other's work, and an exchange of ideas can take place. By contrast, if it were not for The New Theatre Festival, most groups in the Midwest and West—groups such as Theatre X in Milwaukee, Theatre Lab West in Denver, and Soon 3 in San Francisco—would work in isolation. The performances, workshops, and seminars at the TNT Festival provide opportunities for these groups to compare their work with others, to participate in workshops by leading teachers and directors such as Herbert Blau, Kristin Linklater, Richard Schechner, and Yoshi, and to receive critiques of their work by such critics as Ruby Cohn, E. T. Kirby, Jennifer Merin, and Arthur Sainer.

The board of directors of TNT is determined that the festival will continue. They have reaffirmed the primary objective of serving theatre (rather than their having some other purpose, such as promoting tourism). They hope in the future to be able to invite, in addition to less well-known companies, a few groups known internationally for their quality and uniqueness. They plan to expand the workshops, since several of them were over-subscribed this year.

It is also hoped that more small-scale satellite festivals will be held just before or after The New Theatre Festival, enabling some of the groups to be introduced to other communities. This year, just before the TNT Festival, six companies headed for Baltimore performed at a small festival in Philadelphia, which helped defray the travel expenses of groups from the West, helped develop the interest of Philadelphia audiences in such work, and provided an opportunity for theatre practitioners in Philadelphia to see and discuss work from elsewhere.

It is of great importance to the theatre in this country that The New Theatre Festival survive and continue to increase its effectiveness. It is hoped that funding sources will come to recognize this. During 1976–77, the Theatre Program of the National Endowment for the Arts gave \$5.9 million to support American theatre; The New Theatre Festival received nothing, although it was given a special grant of \$15,000 from another NEA program. Given the purpose of NEA, perhaps the Festival can expect greater support in the future. At present, the experimental theatres in this country must be grateful to the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, which is the chief benefactor of the festival.

T.S.