

# *Only the Playwright Was Absent*

By CHARLES MAROWITZ

WROCLAW, Poland

**T**HE third Wroclaw Festival of Festivals, a marathon replay of the best student and experimental companies from all over the world, this year drew some 22 entrants from 15 countries, ranging from the United States and Argentina to Spain and Switzerland. Organized and run by Polish students with minimal interference from the Polish Ministry of Culture, it takes place in vast establishment theaters, sardine-sized pocket playhouses and student-halls scattered throughout Wroclaw.

The companies play in their own language without the aid of translation, and if you are not conversant with Bulgarian or Japanese or Dutch, you simply settle back (usually on haunches and not theater seats) and tune in what vibrations you can. The audience consists mainly of students, actors and hangers-on from visiting troupes, and that curious international contingent of critics, intellectuals and assorted eggheads who follow such events with the unshakable fortitude of birdwatchers. They are "assessing the avant-garde tendencies"; the others are just watching shows.

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The most striking aspect of this year's festival was the absence of the playwright. Replacing him was the fashionable concept of the "collective." Ninety per cent of the groups represented worked up their own material through actor-director collaborations relying on improvisation, exercises or excerpts from established texts, newspapers or poems. In Wroclaw, which is of course the city that houses and supports Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theater, it was almost as if that fervent Pole's esthetic had conditioned the thinking of every group that wandered into his Silesian fold. If the "word" was indeed "dead," these collectivists were here to dance on its grave.

And yet celebrations were short-lived, for the grimmest fact of the festival, which became (Continued on Page 5)



Nadine Rosenthal

The "perfectly conditioned woman," Anne Barclay, is fashioned by Joe Volpe in "How to Make a Woman," presented by the Caravan Theater of Cambridge, Mass., at the Festival of Festivals in Wroclaw, Poland. Examining "the dilemmas of male and female role-playing as demanded by American society"

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clearer with each performance, was that the banishment of the author and his replacement by collectivists did not appreciably improve the conduct of theater. In most cases, the collective works were marred with a simplicity and intellectual vacancy which, if it didn't exactly make one yearn for the return of the writer, at least made one slightly nostalgic for his finer achievements.

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The American contingent was represented by the Performance Group's production of "Commune" from New York and by the Caravan Theater from Cambridge, Mass., which brought a women's lib exercise entitled "How to Make a Woman."

"Commune" brings together a whole slew of American obsessions, the most prominent of which are the Mylai massacre and the Manson murders. If these two stories are the spine of the piece, the vertebrae include Melville, Marlowe, the Bible, American folklore and sundry other

sources too subtle to peg. Richard Schechner, the Performance Group's director, is nothing if not eclectic. The company's emphasis on physicality and its approach to structure are derived from Grotowski; there are techniques reminiscent of The Living Theater, La Mama and The Open Theater—which is just a critical way of saying it's in the all-out, hell-for-leather manner of the contemporary avant-garde theater.

Curiously, these grafted-on techniques, like the work of an uncertain Dr. Frankenstein working from a How-To manual, never quite make a monster of their very own. The affinities between Mylai and Manson are intellectually perceptible, but laying one on top of the other doesn't make a very substantial artistic sandwich. The most effective moments in the show are straightforward reportage of the Death Valley atrocities; the most irritating, those moments when members of the audience, in the worst tradition of gauche community-sings, are urged to

sit in the center of the playing area to become the Mylai villagers.

This kind of shotgun wedding between real and contrived effects is not only self-defeating, but esthetically discursive. An awkward audience, herded into the center of a wooden rostrum, does not make the Mylai massacre more vivid; it merely debilitates the useful artifice the company has been weaving around it. (During the performance, a member of the company cut his foot and stepped out of character to request that the performance be stopped so that his wound could be bandaged. It was an unfortunate accident from more than one standpoint, for in one searing, cruelly sobering moment one realized it was precisely that kind of reality which was lacking; that the games, songs and charades of the show were not coming to terms with the combustible implications of the material.)

But to consider the shortcomings of "Commune" without saying at the same time that the Performance Group

is one of the three most important companies in America would be to ogle the hole and ignore the doughnut. Of all the companies in the festival, it had the finest resonance, and the most palpable group feeling.

"How to Make a Woman" is the kind of exercise that reeks of over-intense college "dramatics" where women with looks that would dysfunction computers give themselves over to "theeyitah" instead of pursuing a normal sex life. A professional group, also a collective, the Caravan Theater examines the dilemmas of male and female role-playing as demanded by American society. But the dramatization of clichés in the snappy language of charades oversimplifies to the point of falsification. The company itself is imbued with the kind of cloying cuteness which has not been equaled since the young Debbie Reynolds. The show runs for two hours and overstays its welcome by about a hundred and twenty minutes.

The most interesting groups, by far, were the Po-

lish ones; particularly, the STU Student Theater from Krakow which, using a highly physical, almost processional technique, created a fanged, satirical critique of political contradictions throughout the world, with particular swipes at those in Poland. Entitled "Falling," it is based, thematically rather than literally, on Tadeus Rozewicz's poem of the same name which lampoons the interchangeable demagoguery of political life. There was a certain uplifting spunkiness about the way in which the STU's 12 actors laced into the more preposterous manifestations of their own social-revolutionary democracy without falling into the trap of taking sides when there was none to which they could honestly give commitment.

The Kalamur Group, from Wroclaw itself, treated similar ideas from a metaphysical rather than political standpoint, with an attendant fuzzing of points. But in both cases, one was aware of a squad of actors playing with the kind of conviction that is rarely seen in New York or London. (Perhaps this is only the artistic overlap of a social virtue one discerns in Poland; a sense of brotherhood which is overt and kinesthetic rather than merely avowed; a feeling that actors, who are forever clutching each other and kissing, should share each other's sweat and pain as well as artistic purposes.)

Tokyo was represented by the Neo-Kyogen troupe which performed the story of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" with all the elaborate ritual of the Kabuki. But its ceremoniousness didn't in any way augment the fable. (I kept thinking of how much better Mickey Mouse had been in "Fantasia.") Also ceremonial, but in a parodic vein, was the York University production of "Grass" from Yorkshire, England; an anti-rational dance-and-talk spectacular which incorporated surrealist college-conversations, primitive dances performed by gold-painted nudes wearing cartoon masks, and dwindling, unfortunately, into a son-of-"Hair" finale with the audience invited to take part in a Fillmore East freak-out replete with psychedelic lighting, pop music and a disintoxicating air of trendy ennui.

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The environmental entry was the German, Zimmertheater's production of "Ballad of the Great Horror" by Ghelderode, each of its three acts being staged in a different room, of a large student building; a perambulation which succeeded only in dividing tedium into three equal parts.

The nadir of the festival was unquestionably the Chene Noir group from Avignon, France, whose production of "Aurora" purported to be (I quote their program) "a fantasy about the earth and its children and their struggle with the terrible Bird-Men who conquer planet after planet, sun after sun, in their attempts to become Rulers of the World." This was interminable in the way that a tooth-extraction might be, levered out with a blunt chisel and without the aid of an anesthetic. Happily, it provoked the only happening of the festival when two outraged Dutchmen joined the mummers on stage and began to parody their frantic war dance. The avant-garde

actors, evidencing the kind of hauteur one associates with the Comédie Française, stalked off the stage and refused to perform. The applause that greeted the Dutchmen's coup was deafening in its appreciation.

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Generalizations about experimental theater on the basis of this festival, although tempting, would be as useless as all generalizations based on partial evidence. But having acknowledged that, I shall go on to say that the quintessential hang-up of experimental groups today seems to be their blind allegiance to techniques at the expense of intention; their misguided belief that commitment to non-naturalistic tactics and avoidance of comprehensible meaning automatically confers artistic dividends. It doesn't, and the one great failing of most of these companies today is that they mean less than those repellent, old-fashioned theaters they are attempting to usurp.

For years now, the experimental theater has been exercising its much-touted "right to fail." Surely, that is no longer an acceptable pretext. Failure has, for some companies, become an artistic way of life. What is needed now is the marriage of new means and new meanings — which is why Krakow's STU Theater seems so much the highpoint of this festival; because here avant-garde techniques had been built to support hard political propositions and its resultant popularity in no way demeaned its artistic integrity. Indeed, it rescued avant-garde from the artsy-craftsy pit it so frequently falls into, delivering it into the appreciative hands of normal everyday people.

In the same city in which I watched the riveting expertise of Grotowski's "Apocalypse Cum Figuris" (a taut but unnourishing exercise in intellectual religiosity couched in intimidating, physical terms), I saw the STU's young, less-experienced Polish actors ignite something sublime in a Polish audience. A performance of shared concern which reached their gut as well as their mind and, in so doing, refreshed their psyche. I won't push this reaction into anything so straitjacketed as a conclusion, but for me, it has been food for thought.