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Gerhard Branstner: Kantine. Ein Stück (Eine Disputation) in fünf Paradoxa

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Theater in the Planned Society: Contemporary Drama in its Historical, Political, and Cultural Context. By H. G. Huettich. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1978. xv + 271 pages.

H. G. Huettich offers in this work a true contribution to scholarship on the history of drama in the GDR, an area which in the past has remained less investigated than either lyric poetry or fiction. Quite correctly, Huettich sees theater in the GDR as one of the prime educational tools of a planned society. Because the GDR theater is politicized and the dramatist himself is a political figure, Huettich focuses on the investigation of the strategies used by various dramatists to respond to their political function and examines the manner in which their inescapable social role affects the nature and quality of their work. His major objectives are to outline the historical development of the GDR's contemporary topical drama, that is, drama about the GDR, and further, to "define the sociopolitical function of drama and dramatists in the GDR." The subject matter and the objectives lend themselves well to the author's historical approach. Unfortunately, the period after the Eighth Party Congress is treated in only a few pages, ending with the conclusion that "there seems to be a new dialogue, a give and take among the party, their authors, and the public ... The final returns are not yet in, but barring any radical change in cultural policy, at least from our perspective the prognosis looks positive for the GDR's cultural development during the seventies" (p. 159). Although the author, referring to the Biermann affair, notes in the addendum to the preface that his "tentative assessment of the future has proven to be illusory during the last few months" (p. xv), it would seem that the author in his assessment of cultural politics since 1971 was either too optimistic, or he overlooked essential indications that the so-called Honecker era was not to be as "liberal" as it appeared initially. Huettich's most important contribution results from his emphasis that most of the plays produced in the GDR have been characterized by their positive representations of socialist problems. From Wangenheim, Wolf, and Zinner to Strittmatter, Salomon, and Hammel, the strong, positive, pro-socialist hero or heroine overcomes seemingly insurmountable problems (and usually remnants of bourgeois thinking as well) and contributes at great personal sacrifice to the historical development of socialism. Correctly defining plays of this kind as the mainstream of drama in the GDR, the author centers his attention here, relegating the works by Helmut Baierl, Heiner Müller, and Volker Braun to a "dialectic digression," in order to bring them into a much needed historical perspective, for in the West there has been a tendency to identify the followers of Brecht as the only important dramatists of the GDR.

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Kantine: Ein Stück (Eine Disputation) in fünf Paradoxa. By Gerhard Branstner. Rostock: VEB Hinstorff Verlag. 1977. 93 pages. DDR 3,80 M.

While the book jacket describes Kantine as "ein Stück," the title-page reads, "eine Disputation in fünf Paradoxa." In fact, the work is neither play nor disputation, for it lacks what is essential to both genres: conflict. In a contemporary GDR theatre canteen Toredid, "ein optimistischer Gast," and Pirol, "ein skeptischer Theaterkritiker," discuss whether great art is still possible. In five lectures, which constitute half of the play, Toredid develops a dialectical proof of his contention that socialism provides fertile soil for art. Another quarter of the piece is devoted to Toredid's elaboration of his argument, and in the little space which remains Pirol is allowed to raise a few wan objections, for which he is ridiculed by other characters. Because the discussion is weighted so heavily in Toredid's favor, Pirol all but disappears as a dramatic force, and a truly dramatic conflict is mitigated. The "disputation" is reduced to a single argument. As a result, dramatic action ceases, and the piece is reduced to a static presentation of an abstract idea.

GDR Bulletin, Vol. 4 [1978], Iss. 3, Art. 9

To compensate for this lack of dramatic action, Branstner inserts "theatrical" routines, but these are neither integrated into the argument nor essential to it. They serve merely as barely humorous diversions from the lack of action and actually emphasize the static. Moreover, these interludes are distracting and, therefore, limit the auditor's ability to comprehend Toredid's complex argument, so that one leaves the piece neither enlightened nor entertained. The static nature of the play is regretable, because it blatantly contradicts the very position which Branstner is trying to establish. Greatly oversimplified,his position is that it is the task of art (by which Branstner means literature alone) to help attain social conditions through which the human being may playfully alter reality to achieve gaiety, which is the human essence. To do this, art must itself play with present reality, so that the auditor becomes emotionally and intellectually involved in a productive revelation of reality's hidden possibilities. Art will have accomplished its task when human life is measured by aesthetic rather than ethical standards, when life and art become one.
Neither Toredid's lectures nor the superfluous "theatrical" business forced into them can be considered playful, and while the argument is intellectually intriguing, one is not apt to become emotionally involved in it. Nor does one find much human gaiety in the piece. Indee, the precious attempts at drama diminish the joy one might have had in unravelling the argument.

Worse, the mock dramatic structure disguises discursive reality within an artistic shell. An artwork is a created reality which follows its own logic, and within the artwork an argument succeeds or fails according to the laws of that created logic alone. To mask one reality as another negates the standards by which either can be judged true or false, and the auditor is led to accept logical failings as poetic license. Discursive and artistic legitimacy are thus destroyed. As a result, Kantine remains an academic lecture inappropriately clothed in a ragged dramatic costume.

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NOTES IN BRIEF

Heiner Müller's Cement will be performed professionally by a theater group in Berkeley in the Spring of 1979.

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Prof. Richard E. Wood of Plymouth State College Plymouth, N.H. 03264 is the editor of the journal Sprachprobleme und Sprachplanung, an interdisciplinary medium devoted to human language as a world-wide social and political issue. Harry Spitzbardt of Jena has recently joined the editorial board,and articles on language policy in the GDR might follow.

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The Eden Theological Seminary, 475 E. Lockwood Ave., Webster Groves, Missouri 63119, has created an archives of documents, papers, publications, and correspondence connected with the history of relationships between the United Church of Christ and the Evangelische Kirche der Union (GDR).