Berliner Kritiken: Band III 1974-1979. By Ernst Schumacher. Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1982. 326 pp.

The first collection of Ernst Schumacher's selected theater reviews from the Berliner Zeitung appeared under the title Berliner Kritiken: Ein Theaterdezenium and covered the period from 1964-1974. This third volume contains a representative selection of his reviews in the same newspaper for the five following years from 1974/75-1978/79. Dr. Christa Neubert-Herwig selected the reviews as well as forty pages of photographs from various productions. She also prepared a chronology of productions in the traditional Berlin theaters -- Deutsches Theater, Volksbühne, Berliner Theater, Theater der Freundschaft, Maxim Gorki Theater, and Theater im Palast.

Prof. Dr. habil. Schumacher is a brilliant theater critic when he has good material to work with and refrains from preaching cultural politics. His reviews are incisive and informative; they provide interesting analyses of the plays as well as frank assessments of the performances of the players and the overall production. All too often, however, he feels compelled to serve the state, and then his reviews, and especially his season summaries, are marred by politics.

For each of the theater seasons from 1974/75 through 1978/79, Neubert-Herwig has selected from fourteen to nineteen representative reviews. These are followed by a collection of newspaper articles written by Schumacher at the end of each season in August in which he summarizes the trends and highlights of the season. Taken as a whole, the reviews and summaries provide an excellent survey of the history and development of East German theater in Berlin.

In keeping with productivity demands of the SED, the first season under review, 1974/75, was a highly productive one, according to Schumacher. Over two dozen plays were performed, including over a dozen premieres. Compared with previous years, more classical and contemporary plays were performed, but Schumacher regrets the fact that, as in previous years, classical plays by such authors as Shakespeare, Racine, Gozzi, and Kleist predominated over works by critical realists from socialist countries. He praises, however, the relationship of the theaters of Berlin with workers and young people and their efforts to go on tour and host foreign troupes.

In 1975/76 Berlin theaters proved again, Schumacher notes, that they had taken the SED's demands for more productivity seriously. The classics of many countries were cultivated -- Calderon, Moliere, Ibsen, and Goethe. In addition to a number of East German plays, more works from other socialist countries, above all, the Soviet Union, were produced. Berlin theaters, however, still had not established effective relationships with theaters of other socialist states.

The 1976/77 season in Berlin was disappointing on the whole for Schumacher. Productivity seemed lacking, the classics were neglected, and the socialist-realist plays by East German authors were unsatisfactory. The one bright spot was the rediscovery and new production of works by critical realists such as Nestroy, Hauptmann, Ödön von Horvath, and Georg Kaiser.

In the 1977/78 season that coincided with the 30th anniversary of the founding of the first German workers' and peasants' state, Schumacher's socialist zeal in the reviews and in the summaries reaches its peak. For the first time, Russian and Soviet drama now belongs firmly to the repertoire of Berlin theaters, and he finds improvement in the number and quality of socialist plays by East German authors. This zeal carries over to the 1978/79 season which

shows an increase in productions of plays from other socialist states and a growth in contemporary socialist drama, that, unfortunately, East German works still cannot match.

Given the wealth of detail found in the volume, errors are remarkably few. On page 302 the 1976/77 season date should be omitted. The Hebbel listed on page 319 should be Friedrich, not Johann Peter Hebbel.

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Volksdemokratie im Kino: Propagandistische Selbstdarstellung der SED im DEFA-Dokumentarfilm 1946-1957. By Ernst Opgenoorth. Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1984. 298 pp.

The somewhat redundant title of this book reveals its bias: The self-portrayal of any political organization is by its very nature self-serving. Thus, there would have been no need for the adjective "propagandistic" with its derogatory connotations. Instead, one might well argue that documentary films have a built-in tendency either to idealize or to criticize their subject matter. This book therefore cannot (and admittedly does not) make any claim of non-partisan and value-neutral scholarly objectivity. Prof. Opgenoorth not only defines his own political position as "leftish liberal," believing in a critical-emancipatory view of Marxism, but admits his intention of analyzing films "against the grain," i.e. interpreting not just what the films show but also what they omit. Furthermore, he often stresses discrepancies between the image on the screen and the spoken commentary. Frequently, technical aspects such as camera angle, type and duration of shot, and camera movement are interpreted to reveal the alleged aims of the film makers and

the presumed affect on the viewer. In absence of concrete evidence, this is of necessity a slightly speculative undertaking.

The author analyzes 64 DEFA documentaries from 1946 to 1957, approximately 20% of the total production for the period -- presumably a representative sample. The end date was chosen on the assumption that the destalinization following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 caused significant changes in the GDR as well. Actually, the events of June 17, 1953 turned out to have important consequences in the manner (if not necessarily the substance) of the SED's self-portrayal. In addition, the period covers the years in which TV played no significant role in the GDR as a government-controlled medium of information.

The author finds two major components in the SED's view of democracy, which he labels "stalinistic" and "popular-democratic" (volksdemokratisch). The former emphasizes the leading doctrinaire role of the Party and its hierarchical structure. Its philosophy is best revealed in the slogan "The Party is always right." The latter stresses the participation and consent of the masses in political decisions, allows criticism of dogmatism and bureaucracy, and believes that "if masses of workers do not understand the Party, it is the fault of the Party, not of the workers."

Not unexpectedly, Prof. Opgenoorth finds these two attitudes in frequent conflict between film makers who believe in a certain degree of artistic freedom and the authoritarian demands of the censor for conformity with the Party line. Nor does it come as a great revelation that after June of 1953 greater stress is placed on creating the image of popular involvement in the decision-making process.

The films are grouped by major themes, such as the SED itself, the FDJ, the Soviet Union, the Third World, the fight against Western imperialism, the polemic against neo-fascism in