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H. G. Huettich: Theater in the Planned Society: Contemporary Drama in its Historical, Political, and Cultural Context

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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 + 71 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 could 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.