



LETTERS

THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY BUILDS A THEATRE

The Editors:

As long as there has been literate society, there has been conflict about choice of fare in the theatre. Unfortunately, the theatre always finds it necessary to cater to the taste of the largest faction in order to survive. Therefore, most of our produced plays have been and remain frivolous, musically whimsical, indulgent, and sentimental. . . . The perception of plays like *Death of a Salesman* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* is as rare as an honest politician.

This rarity, strangely enough, is due to the paradox of man's reluctance to accept what he needs most. Working men have seldom looked beyond their desire for physical comfort. And the men of power—industrialists, government officials and leaders, officers of big business, and the clergy—have found themselves too occupied with enhancing and protecting their positions of power to be concerned with moral justice. Thus, the theatre is, and always has been, for the most part, an escape from life rather than an explanation of it. . . .

As one of the few remaining optimists who refuse to believe that the situation on Broadway is hopeless, and as one who holds that there is a

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Write Earle Ernst, Chairman

moral fiber to be aroused in the most insensitive of men, I was elated on first hearing about plans for the Repertory Theatre at Lincoln Center. I felt that, at last, the money and talent would be provided to return dignity of achievement to the New York stage, and that productions of quality would be presented in the atmosphere they deserve rather than in the dismal and inadequate playhouses of Off-Broadway. . . .

I was taken recently on a tour of the new Repertory Theatre at Lincoln Center now [July, 1965] nearing completion. The vulgarity and waste is appalling. The Repertory Theatre was built by a force of millions of dollars to increase and improve the cultural worth of the city, but I should have known that it would only be another monument to the opulence and derangement of the dollar and those who control it. The place has no life, no warmth, no connection with man and his dream. It is a massive, impossible plant which no more can be concerned with understanding than the A&P can be concerned with the dissatisfaction of a single customer. It will employ hundreds of people who will be expendable, except perhaps for the men who operate the IBM light board, and there will be no identity of purpose or sense of individual accomplishment unless it is in *spite* of the nature and construction of the building.

The backstage area is large enough to house an average sized apartment building. The stage itself is, I am sure, capable of supporting the entire Ringling Bros. circus. The auditorium is a frightening conglomeration of automatic devices and modern architectural effects topped off with the identifying characteristic of those who built it: red plush. In short, it is just

too much, and it's limited because it has no limitations. This is the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, the main hall, where major work will be presented to a possible audience of about fifteen hundred a performance.

If there is to be a saving grace, it will be the Forum Theatre, a 299-seat auditorium which appears to be intelligently designed and constructed. However, it is obviously of secondary importance, and it seems significant that it was built below street level as a sort of cellar to the giant upstairs. . . .

I have known Jules Irving and Herbert Blau for a few years. I saw some of their productions in San Francisco, and I am thoroughly convinced of their dedication to and capacity for excellence in the theatre, but I think they will soon become aware of a very different situation existing here than on the West Coast, if they are not aware of it already. Regardless of the enormous help given them by the Foundations out west, they were still constantly involved in a struggle to realize their own dreams, if not merely to survive. Here the struggle has been taken away and replaced by a very unhealthy challenge: they are forced to live up to the expectations of a group of people who are so saturated with false ideals that it is impossible to know what will satisfy them. The necessity of satisfying them at all is, of course, disastrous.

I am sure that the theatre would be much different if Irving and Blau had been permitted to build it themselves. I am just as sure that the work to be done would be better if they had only themselves and their audiences to think about. . . .

If Irving and Blau do not live up to whatever it is that the management expects of them, they will be replaced,

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as were Kazan and Whitehead. Thus, the Repertory Theatre is a corporation like all other corporations. The presidents, presently Blau and Irving, have been selected by the board of directors and may be dismissed at any time regardless of contracts signed or promises made. The Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre is a monster that is currently being manipulated and brought into motion by two devoted men. But no matter how hard they try, they will never be able to breathe a soul into it. No monster yet ever had any feelings, and this one will be no different from the rest. It will live and rear its head and consume and exhibit itself, but it will never care one way or the other.

Better to understand the corporate atmosphere, it should not be overlooked that there is a private entrance for the patrons who contribute the most, a private elevator, and even a private smoking room. These facilities will provide the largest stockholders with a separateness from theatre-goers much like the executive privacy of big business.

The opening production is Büchner's *Danton's Death*. If it is realized with the force that exists in the writing, an achievement of which Blau and Irving are capable, it will be a major theatrical event. The question then comes up whether the management will deem it necessary to neutralize such an event, to blend it in with the sterile landscape in which it was produced. If they do, Irving and Blau will be replaced as were Kazan and Whitehead. If, on the other hand, Blau and Irving are permitted to remain in spite of managerial dissatisfaction and the few failures with the public necessary in the development of such an undertaking, a real theatre may emerge in spite of the plastic

foundation on which it was built. Precedent, however, makes the possibility of that happening most unlikely.

Kenneth H. Brown

EUGENIE LEONTOVICH

The Editors:

It has come to my attention that certain of my remarks made in relation to Mme. Eugenie Leontovich ["Reality Is Not Enough," T27] have been interpreted as either criticism of Mme. Leontovich or a distortion of her approach to acting [see TDR Letters, T29]. I would like to state that my intention was unrelated to either of these two unexpected results.

In my opinion, Mme. Leontovich is one of the most gifted and organic of actresses; her approach could not be described on the more superficial level as being merely an "external" one. And I am indeed aware of her Method training and orientation both as an actress and teacher of acting! Perhaps in my desire to contrast two different personalities I overstressed one particular aspect of her craft.

Alan Schneider

DOLLARS AND DRAMA

The Editors:

I am impressed—very much so—and convinced by Richard Schechner's lead-off piece in the *Dollars and Drama* issue (T29). The focus upon the problems of values, class audiences, and the artists' alienation could not be better. . . .

However, Schechner's statement of the alternatives seems somewhat less than full. It is a fact, for instance, that New York City has pioneered in taking productions of Shakespeare and Span-



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