

College Experimentation?

The first Invitational Festival of Experimental Theatre was held February 22–24 at the University of Michigan. The goals were “to stimulate inventive performance concepts, to provide an outlet for their public performance and critical evaluation, and to bring together people of similar interests to exchange ideas and observe the experimental work of others.” To some extent, these goals were fulfilled by the fact that a clearly planned and organized festival existed. The event was significant both for what it was and for the questions it raised about the nature of theatrical experiment in this country.

The main festival was limited to college and university companies. Eight productions were selected by Donald M. Boros, the organizer, and his staff from written descriptions submitted by about fifty schools. No screening of actual performances was involved. These eight companies were reimbursed, at least in part, for their traveling expenses, and the festival found homes for the participants during their stay in Ann Arbor. The eight colleges and universities and the productions they presented were: Albion College (Michigan), *Knots* (based on the book by R. D. Laing); Antioch College (Ohio), *Show Me a Good Loser and I'll Show You a Loser*; Grinnell College (Iowa), *But This Is Not War*; Illinois Wesleyan University, *Now Playing Playing Now*; Kansas State University, *The Last Glow of Firelight*; New Charter College, Oakland University (Michigan), *Brainwash*; Ohio State University, *Lucifer*; Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania), *Public Utilities or What the Thunder Said*.

While the festival centered on college and university productions, there was also an official Festival Fringe made up of professional, semi-professional, and non-professional groups. The Dream Theatre of the Body Politic from Chicago presented *Five Dream Stories* and gave workshops; The Clap from Ann Arbor performed their *Parade* in a hallway of one of the University buildings; there was a film based on *Kityhawk* of the recent Once Group (see T30); the University of Michigan Jazz Theatre did *Journey*; and, on Sunday morning, The Playgroup from Knoxville, Tennessee, created an informal improvisational piece involving newspapers.

On each of the three evenings of the festival, participants and spectators went to the 750-seat Trueblood Theatre to hear a discussion of the day's activities by Richard Schechner, Robert Corrigan, and Martin Esslin. These public critiques were well attended and lasted two or three hours; on the final day, many of the people went to a large room to continue the session long after the theatre had to be closed.

There would seem to be little need to justify the importance of a festival of this kind. Any type of theatre would benefit from the focus of attention, the exchange of ideas and techniques, and the mutual support possible in a festival, but experimental theatre has even more to gain than traditional theatre does. By its nature, experimental theatre appeals to a limited audience and its practitioners are relatively few; while it needs the “contagion” possible through direct contact, its possibilities for contact within the society are minimal. *The Drama Review* knows that the printed word is not the best way to present theatrical concepts. Performance must be experienced. But there are few, if any, places in this country outside of New York City that offer the possibility of attending a diversity of experimental presentations. Even in New York, an experimental theatre festival could provide artistic comparison, stimulation, and explanation that would be possible in no other way. If scientists find conventions useful for the dissemination of their theories and the results of their ex-

periments, experimental theatre should find regular festivals to be even more rewarding.

Certainly, the analogy with science that is inherent in the term "experimental" could be followed in determining the goals of a theatre festival. Just as scientists work in their own laboratories until certain discoveries have been made and then report on the results of these experiments at their conventions and meetings, theatre groups could bring whatever innovations they developed to an experimental theatre festival, exhibiting them to an audience of their colleagues. One practical problem with this analogy is that, while most discovery in the sciences is verifiable and objectively apparent, "innovation," "discovery," or even "experiment" in theatre are not widely understood and agreed upon.

In their public comments at the Invitational Festival of Experimental Theatre, the three official critics made clear that none of the work they saw at the festival was truly experimental or innovative. Indeed, much of it used Viola Spolin's improvisational techniques, some was derived from Artaud and Grotowski, there were reminders of Peter Brook, and so forth. Thus, "experimental theatre" appeared not as a term indicating innovation—or even an attempt at innovation—but as the name of another genre. Just as the ancient Greek festivals had their categories of "tragedy" and "comedy," here was another readily understood and available category on which to base a festival. "Experimental" was understood as "like the experiments that others have done."

There is some validity in this approach. In high school science courses, students perform simple experiments whose outcome is predictable and expected. These experiments cannot discover anything new and are done not for the results themselves but as a study of the experimental method. Later, when experimental procedures have been learned, they may be applied to original projects that have the potential of increasing man's knowledge. Yet it is quite possible to perform in "experimental" theatre without taking an experimental attitude, without learning how to conduct a theatrical experiment, or even without knowing that an experiment of any kind exists. An actor may perform in a so-called experimental play just as he would in a traditional play. He may merely do whatever the director asks him to do; the director may be working safely within the limits of performance he has seen. Thus, some of the presentations at the festival did not seem to be experimental, even at the most basic self-educational level. And while others clearly functioned at that level, is that what is to be expected of a festival? Clearly, it is not the workbook experiment whose results are already known but the searching and innovative one that is worthy of wide attention.

This brings us to another set of important questions suggested by the presentations at the festival: For whom should the work be innovative? Is absolute innovation the only standard, or should the reaction of a particular audience be taken into account? What is the relationship of experimental and innovative theatre to our society?

The official critics at the festival were highly knowledgeable in both historical and contemporary developments in theatre. They could be expected to recognize absolute innovation—theatrical ideas that were completely new. Yet was this the standard to which the participants aspired? If the critics did not find any examples of absolute innovation, did this mean that the presentations, and perhaps the festival, were a failure? After all, what is "old" to cosmopolitan judges may be "new" in Michigan. This kind of newness may also be important. If theatre is its impact on the spectators, is not such a production for a "naive" audience in a small city as experimental, in a certain sense, as the latest development in New York? It is through deri-

vative productions that absolute innovation is disseminated in our society. New forms are finally accepted everywhere and even the perceptions of those who never go to the theatre have been changed.

This does not mean that any standard other than that of absolute innovation should be accepted at a festival of experimental theatre. The importance of such a festival lies to a great extent in its ability to stimulate and support true innovation. Thus, a work may be obviously derivative in certain respects while offering significant innovation in others. And innovation may occur on an intuitive rather than a conceptual level. Although there were no concepts that appeared significantly original to me at the festival, I am unwilling to admit that innovation was completely absent. I wonder, for example, whether it was only the humor of *The Dream Theatre* and of the Antioch company that caused their obvious popular success. I do not think so. But innovation is registered at perceptual and non-conceptual levels as well as at conceptual ones, and an effort must be made to verbalize innovations created intuitively.

With the hope that the festival will become a yearly event at the University of Michigan, several suggestions may be made for the future. Since the support, sheltering, and nurturing of innovative theatre is the primary goal, critics should not be on the panels. At this year's festival, for example, Martin Esslin discussed the performances in terms of intentionality and art-as-communication. He felt that the theatre artist must know clearly what he wants to say and then find a form that is "stylistically appropriate to the content." Thus, a play is "the best, most appropriate expression of what it tries to communicate." Obviously, this is a possibility. Artists have successfully followed this formula for centuries. But it is not a rule that *must* be followed. When Esslin presents it in this way to young theatre artists, he is limiting and stifling creativity.

According to Esslin, "content must find form . . . but you can't start with form." "Formalism" he feels, "is a sterile concept." Negative value judgments of this kind may be useful in preserving traditional forms and ways of working, but they will not encourage artistic progress. Experimentation has no limits. Any critic who sets prohibitions is antithetical to the avant-garde spirit.

This kind of destructive criticism can work in subtle ways. When Esslin spoke against boredom, there was no disagreement. After all, isn't boredom "bad"? Who could possibly want to bore an audience, as one of the *Knots* people had suggested? Esslin implied another absolute rule to performance. But, like the others, this "rule" does not exist. Even if we overlook the question of *who* is bored—many people walk out of the most significant contemporary performances because they are bored—and the question of art-as-pleasure, it can be argued logically that boredom may be necessary in a particular case. It may, for example, be the only way to reach a particular and unusual state of mind: perhaps "enlightenment" in the Zen sense. Since every "rule" and restriction imposed by a critic takes something away from an experimental artist, there is no need for critics at an experimental festival.

Since a festival of experimental theatre is concerned with a particular kind of creativity, it should maximize the participation of people who are directly involved in such creativity. The public sessions of analysis should be conducted by people able to discuss the practical aspects of avant-garde theatre. Academic generalities may have some usefulness in popular education, but they are out of place in an experimental context. Any invited specialists also should be able to demonstrate points, suggest techniques, and so forth in work/analysis sessions with the groups. (At this year's festival, Richard Schechner, founder of *The Performance Group*, was the only "critic" able to function at this level; in addition to becoming the focus of the public sessions,

he met privately with certain groups.) Of course, as many formal and informal occasions as possible should be created for the exchange of information and methodology between the groups themselves. This is even more important than having large public panel discussions for a general audience. (In many ways, the Chicano Festival [see T60] could serve as a model for practical exchange among participants.)

This does not mean that the only concern should be with the technical aspects of experimental theatre. Theory and analysis are equally important, but discussions in these areas should relate to the particular concerns of experimentalists. The presentations should be useful. Indeed, it would be possible to establish specific common goals and to isolate particular areas for investigation—thus stimulating new types of performance.

Some effort should be made to reduce the technical restrictions implicit in any festival. The regulations of the Michigan Festival stated, for example, that “the visual aspects of performance (setting, lighting, costumes, and properties) should be capable of being set up and readied in thirty minutes.” Thus, most of the presentations tended toward “poor theatre,” in Grotowski’s sense of the phrase. While necessities of travel, availability of space and equipment, size of staff and workers, and so forth will always impose restrictions, it is hoped that exceptions to the rules can be made in some cases and that experimentation will not be channeled in certain directions for only practical reasons.

Finally, it would be helpful to increase the involvement of semi-professional and professional Fringe groups at a basically college-and-university festival. In some cases, the distinction may only be a technical one. Certainly, colleges have the potential of doing significant work. They can provide physical resources, work time, and audiences—all of which may be problems for a Fringe group. But in most cases the difference between college groups and the professional fringe is a qualitative one, and the amateur performers have much to gain from even a brief association.

This suggests some of the crucial questions posed by the Invitational Festival of Experimental Theatre: Why have not colleges and universities produced significant experimental work? (Perhaps, it is being done but is not available to the proper audience.) Why, with their apparently great potential, are colleges and universities content to borrow from international avant-garde theatre just as their traditional colleagues are content to borrow from Broadway? When a great deal of scientific research is conducted in colleges and universities, why are these schools unable or unwilling to support artistic research?

The answer is not in the age of the artists. Rimbaud’s pivotal contributions were all made before he was twenty. But Rimbaud was not in an academic atmosphere. Is it the nature of our academic institutions to stifle creativity or to channel it into traditional and “safe” areas? Does respect for the values and accomplishments of the past prohibit new developments? Are there some students who will not be satisfied with being taught what somebody else knows and who will attempt to learn that which nobody knows? A continuing Festival of Experimental Theatre is one way to find an answer to these questions.

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