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Trumpets and Drums in the Night: The 1956 Berliner Ensemble Season in London and its Aftermath

This paper focuses on the historical first visit of the Berliner Ensemble to London in 1956, arguing that it was the single most important agent in the development of a ‘new wave’ in British Theatre. Having looked at the context of the Ensemble’s two-week season and the belated introduction of the work of Bertolt Brecht to English audiences – in theatrical, political, and economic terms – it discusses the critical reactions to the performances. Questions of audience constituency are broached and due consideration is given to the role played in promoting ‘Brechtian’ theatre by the new generation of directors who were shortly to populate the emergent major subsidised arenas of the English Stage Company, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the National Theatre. The subsequent career of Bill Gaskill is used both to illustrate the way in which the influence of the Ensemble’s work was spread and also to emphasise the vital role that a single figure was to play in the development of British theatre over the next two decades. Gaskill, a man whose directorial experience takes in all three of the subsidised theatres and companies referred to above, famously declared that the visit of the Berliner Ensemble “changed my life”.

“1956 was the year […] the Berliner Ensemble came to London and changed my life.”
(William Gaskill, A Sense of Direction 13)

John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger opened at the Royal Court Theatre in the first season of the newly formed English Stage Company on 8 May 1956. Its box-office success reinforced the sense that it was breaking new ground and it was then, and frequently still is now, regarded generally as the production that kick-started the ‘new wave’ in British Theatre, a claim that is epitomised by the title of John Russell Taylor’s almost contemporaneous account of the ‘movement’, Anger and After (1962). However, that same year a rather less publicised event took place elsewhere in London, an event that would prove to have a far more momentous significance for subsequent developments, and is – arguably – the single most important catalyst and model for changes in British Theatre. In the following, I want to tell the story of what was a momentous coming together of European cultures and to trace just one of the many resultant ‘shock-waves’ of that collision.

On 4 June 1956, The Times headlined its regular column on forthcoming theatrical events in London, “Berlin Company to Act in London”. The article announced the imminent arrival of T. S. Eliot’s The Family Reunion (directed by Peter Brook); the first professional production of Genet’s The Maids in England; and, because it “has aroused such interest”, five extra
performances of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. However, the writer’s major concern was with the anticipated arrival of the Berliner Ensemble to perform in the capital. Readers were assured of the international significance of the event in the column’s opening sentence: “The last place in which to be insular is the theatre, which is seldom so full of ideas that it can afford to disdain inspiration from other lands, so that there is good reason to welcome the announcement that Mr Bertolt Brecht is shortly to bring to England his Berliner Ensemble” (“Berlin Company”).

The visit would be organised by Peter Daubeny, who would go on to present the major annual series of World Theatre Seasons in London, and this adds further significance to the announcement quoted above. The writer’s emphasis is less on the importance of a visit from this particular company, and more on the need for Britain to re-connect culturally with the wider world: a Britain that was still firmly entrenched in a post-Second World War mould, with, in 1953, the belated abolition of sweet rationing giving Jimmy Porter the possibility of running his market stall off-stage in *Look Back in Anger* just three years later, whilst looking back to the conflict that he had missed out on. If the World Theatre Seasons were to provide the heavy action in this process, at the time, the arrival of the Berliner Ensemble was seen generally as an important but essentially minor engagement to all but a few. Nor was the response to the forthcoming visit always positive. A preview in the left-of-centre *Manchester Guardian* talks of the work of the Ensemble as being “the most controversial theatre in Europe today”, but then places it in its home context before offering a general praise of the output:

The Berliner Ensemble is criticised from opposing ends. The average citizen says that it is too realistic, for it provides no escapes and provokes no passions. Moreover, it is didactic: those who want to remain politically untainted – in their Communist purity – keep well away from it. The sophisticated critics decry its lack of realism, and allege that it has the flavour of a circus troupe. The support for the ensemble is equally inconsistent. The admirers and critics of Brecht’s work are united in recognising his creative genius and the worth of his innovations. […] In the meantime even those whom he ridicules may be grateful to him for providing a theatre of such excellence. (“Preview”)

Elsewhere, the welcome was less enthusiastic: “a correspondent” in the right-of-centre *Times* of 14 August 1956 was quite brisk about the way in which Brecht’s work had supposedly been embraced by the cultural establishment:

For some months now it has been well-nigh impossible to open a literary or theatrical review without coming across the name of Mr Bertolt Brecht. […] This is a most unusual phenomenon in a country that is normally reserved (to say the