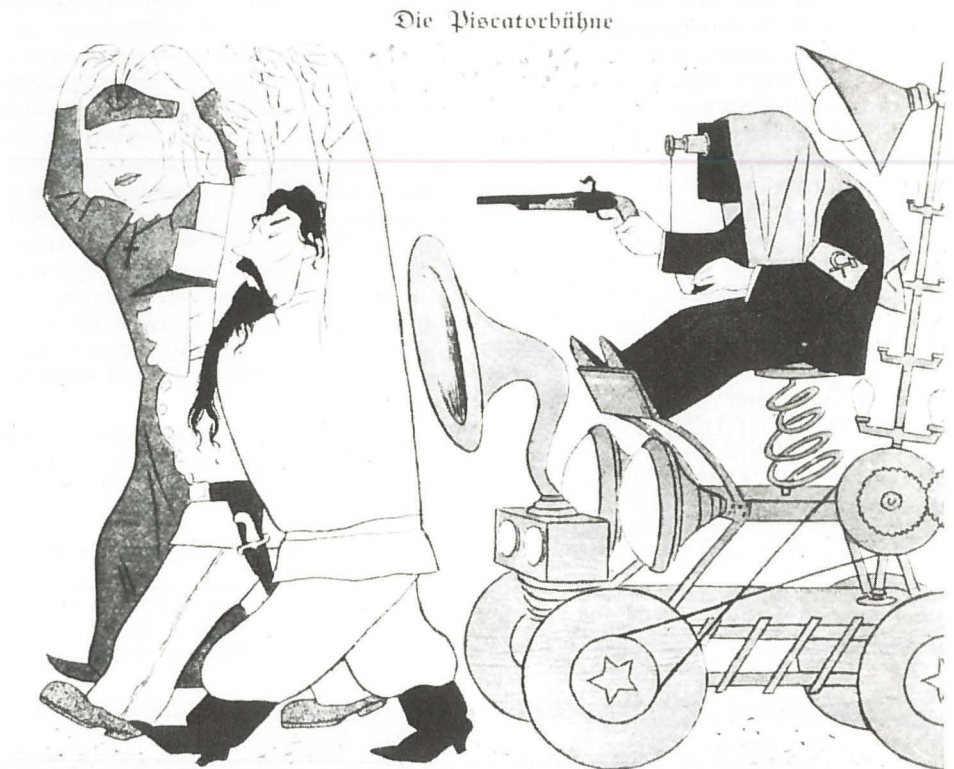


Erwin Piscator and his 'total theatre'

ANTHONY PUGH

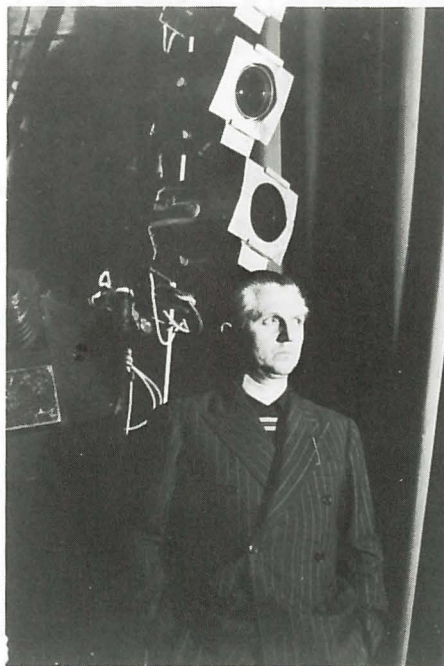
It was one of the ironies of his difficult life that Erwin Piscator's entirely laudable concept of a 'total theatre', by which a proletarian audience was to be encouraged towards self-knowledge and a greater awareness of its place and power in history, should have been exploited best by just the sort of demagogues he most abhorred.

The crowds that stayed away in droves from the various peoples' theatres in Weimar Germany he was associated with ('I carry my insolvencies', he was to say ruefully, 'like other people wear medals') were, by the 'thirties, only too happy to be self-knowing and aware at Nuremberg Rallies, at Parades in Red Square, and even



"All the Kings Men"
by Robert Penn Warren
Dramatic Workshop
New York 1948
Production Erwin Piscator

"The Piscator Stage"
with Tilla Durieux, Max Pallenberg,
Paul Wegener and Erwin Piscator,
Drawing by Karl Arnold
Simplicissimus Stuttgart, 1928.



*Erwin Piscator
as Director of the
Dramatic Workshop
in New York*

Volksbühne in Berlin (which owed its existence to the socialist workers movement), and later at his own theatre, the Piscator-Bühne (for which Walter Gropius had designed, but never built, Piscator's ideal conception of a 'total' theatre) seem to have needed a lot more writing than they got. 'Rasputin, The Romanovs, The War, and The People that Rose Against Them', a fair specimen of the kind of thing Piscator liked to set his hand to, was intended to be a 'documentary' rather than a drama, but all that seems to have been remembered about it, even at the time, was the setting Piscator and his designer Traugött Müller devised for what action there was. This took the form of a hemispherical igloo made of balloon fabric (it weighed about five tons and was a devil to operate) which rotated on the revolve and had flaps that opened and shut synchronously with changes in the narrative. Again, the lugubriously-titled 'Hoppla we are alive' by Ernst Toller seems memorable only for the three-storey 'dolls-house' set with its built-in film screen (models of this and the Rasputin set have recently been on show at the very comprehensive exhibition of Piscator's life and work at the Riverside Studios). For Hasek's

perhaps at the run-ups to Presidential elections in the USA. Anywhere, in fact, where all the multi-media effects and all the meticulous 'organisations of the stage' Piscator had pioneered were used for controlling rather than liberating purposes.

But, moral issues, agit-prop and social realism aside, what an imaginative designer and producer and director and all-round man of the theatre Piscator was. It was said of him that 'he was the best playwright who never wrote a play'. Certainly, many of the plays he produced, first at the Freie