

The Ensemble Theatres of Berlin

BERLIN—Capital City of the German Democratic Republic—has fostered two of the most influential theatre workers of our times: Bertolt Brecht and Walter Felsenstein. To these great men the whole world owes much of its current approach to the staging of dramatic and musical theatre. Brecht and Felsenstein are no longer with us but they live on through the ensembles that they created: Brecht's *Berliner Ensemble* and Felsenstein's *Komische Oper*. These are true ensemble theatres with permanent companies where no actors have star status although virtually every member of the ensemble, whether actor, director, scenographer or technician, has star quality. The revolving repertoires are continuously being revitalised with new productions which are only offered to the audience after intensive and extensive planning and rehearsal preparation.

Berlin has a long tradition of ensemble. The *Deutsches Theater* (with the *Kammerspiele* as a second house) was Rheinhardt's theatre and the *Deutsche Staatsoper* in the Unter den Linden has been directed by Spontini, Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn, Nicolai, Richard Strauss, Kleiber, Krauss and Karajan!

Most of the theatres of Berlin are old proscenium houses and, when they have been refurbished, the auditoria have been restored rather than remodelled. None of these houses is particularly small in terms of seating capacity but they are all INTIMATE. To walk into the *Deutsches Theater* and *Deutsche Staatsoper* is to have confirmation of one's suspicion that a great deal of nonsense is talked about (a) the proscenium as a barrier between actor and audience and (b) the playhouse and the opera house being incompatible species. In Berlin the *Deutsches Theater* and the *Staatsoper* are eminently successful in projecting the Drama and Opera respectively. But the *Oper* could perform many plays and the *Theater* could house most operas.

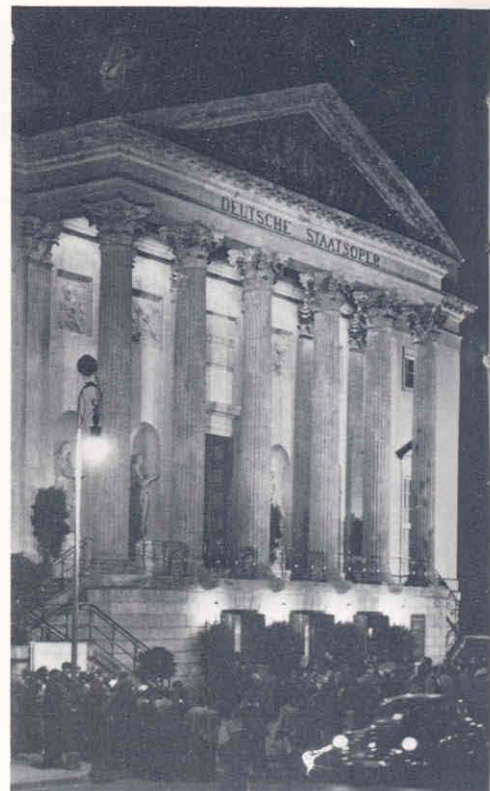
On entering the auditorium or walking on to the stage of either theatre, the intimacy is an immediate surprise: it is not evident from previous study of plans or photographs. On reflection, however, there is one clue that keeps surfacing again and again: in new buildings as well as old, intimacy seems to come when the audience is stacked in shallow tiers on every vertical surface. The recipe seems to be: vertical stacking with minimum overhang.

On its restoration in 1955, after extensive war damage, the *Staatsoper* was given a conventional operatic stage with lifts and sliding wagons but the *Deutsches Theater* has an earlier flavour with its permanent rigid cyclorama. The Berlin theatres are refurbished on a planned cycle. The

Deutsches Theater will shortly close for a three year reconstruction to include an annexe with variable stage and soon it will be the turn of the *Staatsoper* to have an update of some of its equipment to take advantage of advances in modern electronic technology.

The *Komische Oper* has had a rebuild which kept the auditorium intact but modernised the stage, rehearsal, workshop and audience-amenity areas. In accordance with Felsenstein philosophies, the stage has been deliberately kept non-mechanical and the previously flat acting area has been given a heavy rake. This rake has been duplicated in the rehearsal room but the ballet rehearsal floor has been given a gentler slope to simulate performance conditions while minimising the tiring effect of long rehearsal on a steep rake. The decoration of the *Komische Oper* makes a pleasant feature of mirrors. Acoustics are very sympathetic and this, of course, is essential for a company who treat opera as musical theatre with acting ensemble playing a role as prominent as that of vocal ensemble.

The German *Volksbühne* movement originated at the end of the 19th century to make theatre performances more readily accessible to lower income groups. With all theatres now readily accessible to everyone,



the original role of the *Volksbühne* has changed and it now seeks to widen contact between drama and audience by exploring a wide range of production styles and staging relationships. The shape of Berlin's *Volksbühne* theatre encourages this for it is a proscenium house where the architecture gives purity of sightline preference over audience contact. Consequently many of the productions have explored staging

