

economics and big business took over and would have engulfed the original plot, had not Tilla Durieux been playing Claire Barsin. Piscator had hitherto adapted and rewritten with sovereign abandon, as authors like Ehm Welk and Ernst Toller testified, but now he was indirectly in the hands of his backer, Frau Durieux's prospective husband. He was reduced to delegating two of his staff to coax his leading lady to accept changes in her lines, where he would normally have scrapped the entire character when it became superfluous. The play remained uneven and inconsistent.

At the end of the season Herbert Ihering appraised the position of the Piscator-Bühne, which at that point still seemed set for another season, and suggested that the first act of the play would probably have guaranteed it a modest success as an experimental piece if it had been staged in the familiar surroundings of the Nollendorfplatz. It was, after all, groping toward a dramatic analysis of economic affairs, such as was soon to exercise the mind of Brecht, whose *Wheat* (*Weizen*, sometimes referred to as *Joe Fleischhacker aus Chicago*)—listed for production in the Piscator-Bühne's preliminary publicity—deals with a similar subject, a wheat baron's dealings in grain on the Chicago Exchange. *Wheat* was never completed.

XX

THE COMEDY OF BIG BUSINESS BOOM

PISCATOR-BÜHNE LESSING-THEATER

April 8 to May 3, 1928

In a conversation with Lania which had taken place about the time when we were founding our theater (I had put up Lania's *General Strike* [*Generalstreik*] for performance at the Volksbühne at the time of the English miners' strike, because the subject and the form seemed to me worthy of production), he had suggested an idea for a comedy which I liked very much. What he had in mind was to show how profiteers use revolutions, and to prove that the revolutionary idea also triumphs over the personalities who try to misuse it. The comedy with the provisional title "*Red versus White*" (*Rot gegen Weiss*) took up the events in China, and placed at the center of the action a Chinese general in England who falls into the hands of a slick manager; the latter exploits him financially as an anti-bourgeois fiend. The comic consequences of this affair, in the course of which the manager goes bankrupt, provided the backbone of the play.

The comedy proved to be unusable in the first version. The basic idea was too weak to carry the whole play and the action was unconvincing. Lania himself was dissatisfied, and decided to rework the play from the beginning, taking the available cast into consideration in the process. This was the first attempt to base a production on our theater and its requirements from the very outset: the

author had a commission from the theater and was in close contact with the director and with all the possibilities and requirements of our theater from the beginning as he tackled his task.

In July we traveled down to Heringsdorf [on the Baltic] together, and while Toller, Gasbarra and I worked on the preparations for *Hoppla, Such is Life!*, Lania was busy on the revised version of *Red versus White* which now bore the title *Boom*. By the end of July two acts of the comedy were ready and when Lania read the play to us we found it excellent, especially Frau Durieux, who could see herself making a big hit in the central role. Our intention was to put on this play as our second production.

I have already explained why we decided to follow *Hoppla* with *Rasputin*. But it also emerged as we came to grips with *Boom*, and as the tasks facing our theater became clearer to us, that even the final version of the comedy was not good enough. We realized that we could not skate over the surface of the problems, that people expected us to get to the heart of the matter, and that the subject was much too serious and important to be used as mere background for a diverting idea.

This subject was oil, and once again the subject proved to be primary. It was much in people's minds at the time, because of Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil* and because of everyday politics, and it cried out to be explored in much greater depth and breadth than was done in Lania's comedy.

Lania could see this. Since he was keen to stage the play on our stage, he turned down acceptances of the existent version of *Boom* by other theaters and went to work on the play for the third time.

The more intensively we explored the subject and the problem, the greater the difficulties became. Together we worked our way through volumes of literature, statistics and industrial reports, and it gradually became clearer that the subject of *Boom* had in it the germ of an economic comedy in the grand manner, that the subject had possibilities which opened up whole new perspectives for the theater. But—it was the beginning of February and the Lessing-Theater was due to open on March first with Lania's play. An insoluble dilemma. On the one hand, there was the need to put on Lania's play, on the other hand, it was a pity to waste the subject and problem of the comedy on banal entertainment in the usual manner. A fundamental revision of the kind we had in mind would have taken many weeks or months.

The only possible result of our work was a compromise. Once again the conditions of work, the lack of time, the constraints imposed by the business side of the theater were more powerful than

our own wishes and intentions. Leo Lania later made the following comments on his handling of the subject and on his intentions in the program notes for the play:

The Subject

"The attempt to put topical, political and economic subjects into dramatic form faces great difficulties from the very start—especially here in Germany. Bourgeois postwar Germany, 'American' as it may choose to act, still thinks in traditional terms—apart from a small section in industry—listens with dulled nerves, and looks at real life through spectacles which have robbed their vision of its freshness. This natural shortsightedness of bourgeois intellectuals is increased by an artificial limitation, their narrow angle of vision: there are high walls built around every desk, not a glance strays past the quarto sheet of manuscript, the folio page of the book, the sketch on the drawing board and onto the street. In America students work during vacations as farmers, waiters, or telegraph operators, doctors have farms, and almost everybody who works for a living samples dozens of jobs during his working life, and has social life before his eyes from childhood. Whether it is a matter of stocks and shares, oil companies, power stations, the Stock Exchange, technology, the press or the judiciary—education and the life the individual leads ensure that every level and class of society has an exact knowledge of 'practical,' that is, public life. Soviet Russia experiences politics directly and personally as its destiny. But in Germany all things conspire to encapsulate each class and each profession, so that the individual never comes to terms in any clear or personal way with facts, events and institutions of social life. Since stocks and shares and the coal industry, technology and politics are a special preserve of a small initiated minority in this country, and since the great mass of the people, in particular the class-conscious trade unions, are denied any insight into the social organism, there is no contact between the individual and events in public life, which is precisely where a topical comedy of industrial life has to be located, unless it is satisfied with providing peripheral glosses on political and economic life from the outside."

Author and Director

"For us it is no longer enough merely to show effects, or to use politics merely as an interesting backdrop before which various psychological conjuring tricks can be demonstrated. What we want to see are not episodes from the times, but the times themselves, and we want to reach a clear understanding of them and grasp their essential internal connections as a totality. But this need to process and communicate political subjects reduces the present-day theater to limp helplessness. If in my comedy I was able to experiment along these lines it was thanks to the

support that I received from Erwin Piscator, both on the script and with the direction."

Dramatic Content and Stage Form

"The hero of this comedy is oil. The intention is to show the complex of economic questions which govern this subject, and to reveal the laws and the phases of its economic exploitation as well as its political side effects. I chose Albania as the setting for the play, although that country has so far been of little importance to the international oil market, because the visible stages in the international struggle can be demonstrated here from start to finish on a small scale. Trebitsch-Lincoln's connections with Albania have no documentary foundation.¹ But he is such a perfect representative of the type of adventurer who impresses his stamp on all the bloody feuds and plunderings that have afflicted the wells of Mexico, Baku and Mossul, that I took the liberty of adding a few new feats of heroism to those which history already attributes to Trebitsch-Lincoln, and of transposing his historical deeds from China and Germany to Albania. Piscator's production started from the idea that the subject and all its effects should be shown objectively in the construction of the set. The ideas and suggestions he as the director put forward helped to show me the way in which my intentions might be realized. And these intentions did not stem from spontaneous ideas or the inspiration of the moment; they sprang from the ideas which governed this theater and the task it has set for itself. Fertilized by the theater and by our collective cooperation, this comedy came into being."

Although we were worn-out with the hectic struggles during the first half of the season, we clenched our teeth and went to work. At first all seemed to be going well. The first act came along very well with our joint efforts, and it became apparent that by starting with the subject "oil" we could achieve not merely a deeper analysis of the content, but had the chance to develop an entirely new form of comedy. I wanted to expose the "struggle for oil" from the roots up, and this is how I came to base my production on a progressively constructed set which was built in close conjunction with the action. Starting with an empty stage—the naked earth—the oil rush provoked by the chance discovery of an oil well was to develop from the tiniest beginnings to the proportions of an avalanche, a sequence was to be enacted before the eyes of the audience which

1. Ignaz Timotheus Trebitsch-Lincoln (1879–1943) was a notorious political adventurer. Born in Hungary, preacher in New York, Liberal member of Parliament in England in 1910, mixed up in sensational spy revelations in 1915 and held under arrest until 1918. Involved in the Kapp Putsch in Berlin in 1920. Autobiography: *The Greatest Adventurer of the Twentieth Century. The Truth about My Life.*

would show all the technical processes in the production of oil. From the discovery of the oil well to the preparations for drilling, from the construction of the drilling derricks to the marketing of oil as a commercial product, the action—rivalry, murder, profiteering, corruption, revolution—was to unfold before the spectator and to involve him in all the machinations of the politics of international oil.

But only in the first act did it prove possible to put our insights into practice. In the second act we had to find a way to link up with the action of the original comedy, because the main role would otherwise have been entirely lost from sight. This contradiction proved to be insurmountable. The new version turned the power of oil into the sole hero and central role, and yet the central role of the heroine, which was rooted in the comedy version, but scarcely functioned as anything more than an episode in the new play, had somehow to be saved. Compromises at every turn. As always, the compromises had to be paid for.

The first thing that happened was that the premiere of *Boom* had to be postponed once more, at first for fourteen days and then for four weeks. In the meantime, a show had to be improvised in the Lessing-Theater (see p. 293). The rehearsals for *Boom* itself, much hampered by the need to rewrite the script daily, made halting progress and came to a complete standstill when Tilla Durieux fell ill and could not attend rehearsals.

In the interim I worked with Lania on the film accompaniment, which was to have quite a special function in the play this time and was edited from quite a different point of view. ✓

I developed the action dynamically on the stage, and this gave the scaffolding set and the props a significance of their own; the film, too, was not only to sketch and extend the background of the play, was not to be mere illustration, but was to provide a "framework" for the comedy in the truest sense of the word. LW ★

This journalist's comedy was to develop out of the newspaper, that is to say, the entire stage opening was closed by a sheet of newsprint, a cloth which, like a newspaper, was divided into columns, each of which corresponded to a particular set on the stage. While on the stage the struggle between the rival groups, between the Italian and the French oil companies raged around the oil well, the press war between France and Italy raged on the cloth, showing the contradiction in world politics by means of animated cartoons and captions. In this way I achieved extraordinary simplicity and conciseness of action and was able to outline events with textbook clarity. The sheet of newsprint was constantly pushed forward or

taken away or broken open at different points to reveal the stage, and the action began just at the point at which the newspaper commentary had left off. At the end, when the newspaper went up in flames, the Albanian revolution had reached its climax and set fire to the oil wells.

It seems to me that with the production of *Boom*, which is one play I cannot be accused of overloading with apparatus or encumbering with technical devices, we achieved the most polished performance of the whole season in terms of simplicity of staging and fluidity of form.

The Political Limits of Objectivity

With *Boom* we ventured for the first time into the territory of present-day international industrial politics. The question was a delicate one for us because it touched on the position of the Soviet Union in the political and economic struggle for markets for oil: it touched on the Soviet relations or conflicts with the American and English companies which produced and sold oil, and on the Soviet position as a competitor within the capitalist international economy.

If the play had concerned itself with this problem alone, there might have been a chance of illuminating every corner and eliminating any ambiguities. We could have shown that the Soviet Union pursued a capitalist policy in international trade precisely to maintain its significance for the international workers' movement. As it was, this problem was linked with a plot involving a national revolution in an oil-producing area in which the Soviet Union appeared on the one hand as an economic factor, and on the other as a revolutionary factor. In the next to last version of the play, which we called the "Borodin version," the female lead appeared as the representative of the Russian Naphtha Syndicate and as a secret political agent of the Third International. The malicious or ignorant could conclude from this double role that the Soviet Union provoked national revolutions in order to get its hands on the oil under favorable conditions. There were very serious objections to this version in the dramaturgs' office, which was also a political office in our setup. If I tried at first to ignore these objections and went on rehearsing this version until the evening before the premiere, it was because I hoped that our well-tried pedagogic style of staging would enable us to show the Soviet motifs properly and avoid ambiguity.

This hope was not fulfilled. What then happened on the evening of the dress rehearsal was that the figure of Frau Barsin appeared to

condemn Soviet policy as dishonest and two-faced in front of an assembly consisting mainly of political personalities, representatives of the KPD, the Soviet Trade Mission and the Soviet Embassy, that I had brought together for the purpose. It proved to be quite impossible, without doing great harm to the Soviet Union, to represent in a single figure two spheres which the Soviet Union had made every effort to keep separate. The very opposite of what we had intended with this production would have happened, an event which would have had unforeseeable consequences for the theater. I was clear in my own mind that it would be better to close the theater than to allow a performance which would have permitted even the slightest doubts about our theater's political standpoint.

The dress rehearsal ended at 3:00 A.M. on April 7, 1928. The critics gathered in the manager's office at the Lessing-Theater, a room which smelled as musty as if the windows had not been opened once since Otto Brahm's times.² On all sides, and most spiritedly from the lady representing the Communist Party, the Borodin-version was declared to be impossible. The representative of the *Rote Fahne* made it known that, to his personal regret, he was going to be forced on political grounds to attack the Piscator-Bühne sharply for the first time if the play went out in the form in which we had just seen it. I quite understood the justification for these criticisms, although many of the arguments seemed to me exaggerated.

Outside the day gradually dawned, the day on which the premiere would later take place. Pale, our faces marked by sleepless nights, unwashed, unshaven, completely exhausted by a task which had scarcely left us time to eat or sleep for three weeks, we now had a fully rehearsed play on our hands in which scarcely any alteration was possible and which, despite this, we could not put on. It was the most serious test of our nerves since our theater had opened. Lania had a nervous breakdown. The only man who seemed at ease, indeed even in high spirits, was our old friend Bert Brecht, sucking eternally at his black cigar with a leather cap pulled jauntily over his forehead. He could see a possibility of transforming the function of the entire role of the female lead at short notice and offered to go to work on the spot with Lania and Gasbarra. Postponement of the opening night for at least two days would be necessary before he would attempt it, and it was still doubtful whether Frau Durieux would agree to this alteration. It was, in fact, a frightful thing to ask her to do, to change entirely a role which she had already built up along particular lines. Otto Katz and Frä.

2. Otto Brahm was director of the Lessing-Theater from 1904 to 1912.

Wellhöner took on the thankless task of persuading Frau Durieux that a revision was necessary.

By now it was 5:00 A.M. A magnificent spring day had dawned outside. I cursed my profession once again. A burden lay upon us which we were scarcely able to bear any further. When I reflected that there was only a week left before Karlheinz Martin was supposed to stage *The Last Emperor (Le Dernier Empereur)*, I would dearly have liked to run away to a place where I would have heard and seen no more of the theater. Instead, we drove to my apartment, where we worked on a new version of the Barsin character till the afternoon. The fact that the figure had previously represented the Third International and the Russian Naphtha Syndicate, but was now to appear as a representative of the South American ABC states who had only *pretended* to be a Soviet agent, was not without its comic aspects. This solution enabled us to let the text of the role stand right to the end, and to finish off with an "ingenious and surprising twist." I must say that I did not feel too good about all this. The play, apart from the first scenes, suffered from the thinness of its dialogue and the weakness of its individual scenes and this conclusion was bound to turn it into more of a pure comedy. But what was left for us to do, if we wanted to save the production at all? In one last piece of forced labor which used up our last reserves of strength, the central role was rewritten to take into account its new function. Although Frau Durieux was also suffering from acute nervous strain, she stuck it out with admirable self-discipline to the day of the performance. If we failed at the time to give her adequate recognition for her willingness to make any sacrifice that might save the performance, it was only because of the strain and overwork that the conditions at the time imposed on us.

The echo that *Boom* awakened in the general public was just as full of contradictions as had been the case with the other productions that season. What is interesting is that the right-wing press, which in the past had never tired of branding our performance as dull and tedious now suddenly attacked the "Super-Broadway" and the "operatic gags" in this show.

Der Tag wrote:

"Piscator is producing 'Super-Broadway.' Moscow, Hollywood and all the boulevard-comedy of an effete Europe are combined in one final culmination. The whole world is a gigantic loony bin. The world revolution needs the help of operetta to coax people to join it."

And the *Lokal-Anzeiger*:

"Courths-Mahler in Piscator's theater.³ There is still a future here. This is the way out of Toller's cul-de-sac. A touch of genius as bold as it is ingenious, the Piscator-Bühne is now determined to follow Frau Hedwig Courths-Mahler's star."

The *Deutsche Zeitung* found it all "very boring." The *Tägliche Rundschau* wrote: "soporific . . . the Piscator-Bühne is twitching in the last stages of senile decay." The *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* is an exception on this occasion:

"Leo Lania's attempt to write a comedy of big business deserves a good deal more attention than all the potboilers which attempt to add a slightly different nuance to things that have already been shown a million times."

And, indeed, the economic experts, among them, for example, Morus in the *Weltbühne*, handled the play with much more justice than the gentlemen in the literary periodicals, who admitted that they were not competent to judge the political and economic questions with which the play dealt, but nonetheless never hesitated for an instant to dismiss the mechanism of international profiteering which was shown in *Boom* as phony and the product of the fevered imagination of a writer who had no grasp of the real problems. The political angles were on this occasion placed in the foreground by the democratic press.

For the *8-Uhr-Abendblatt* the comedy was not revolutionary enough:

"I do not reject Piscator's repertoire because it is too revolutionary—I reject it because he lacks total revolutionary conviction. He is a fanatical compromiser; to reduce the matter to a concise formula, he is a reactionary who dulls our artistic conscience. It is not the bourgeois public that must beware of him—it is rather those who are working for a logical development and who have made that their life's work. It is they who must closely examine his very questionable methods."

Felix Hollaender saw the following reactionary element in the comedy: "Herr Lania has no wish to displease the bourgeoisie; he

3. Hedwig Courths-Mahler (1867–1950) was author of such novels as *I'll Never Leave You (Ich lasse dich nicht)*, 1915). Her name was synonymous with trivial, sentimental best sellers.

has the finish contrived by a very clever woman whose charm and genius for business manage to create a community of interest between capitalist America and Soviet Russia." How wrong this objection is has been shown in the preceding pages, where I have explained the reasons for changing the end of the comedy in deference to political requirements.

The *Vossische Zeitung* took it amiss that "the public enjoyed the confidence tricks of Trebitsch-Lincoln and laughed at them. This was pure bourgeois pleasure of the sort usually derived from operettas or French farce. It is the aim of the Piscator-Bühne to turn bourgeois citizens into Communists. Is not the effect of his theater rather to turn Communists into bourgeois citizens? If the two classes have the same favorites and the same pleasures—and pleasure is always a form of property—must they not fall into each other's hands? If both sides laugh, it means the end of the class struggle, and Herr Piscator is the father of social peace."

The *B.Z.* pointed out that the play offered "ideas and experiments which are stimulating, which escape from the dull routine in which the theater would otherwise ossify. It is not a case of just being different. Not merely technical and mechanical innovation."

Vorwärts found that, "the idea of making Trebitsch-Lincoln into a comic and satirical captain in the farce of international profiteering is worth a fortune. Leo Lania, who had the courage to do this, has rendered German drama as great a service as Schiller with *William Tell* and *The Maid of Orleans* (*Jungfrau von Orleans*). The play, the director and the actors provided a more interesting spectacle than anything we have seen in Piscator's theater to date. It was more theatrical and more lively than last winter. The message was not overloaded. The dramatist, the director and the actors are still experimenting, but it seems that they have moved a step toward the theater that we want, the theater whose techniques and convictions are related to our times and which is more than fatuous entertainment."

Kerr, Ihering and the critic in the *Rote Fahne* touched on the basic principles and problems of the subject.

"So go and see it: you will not be amused, but you may come out cleverer. That is the important thing. Let us have no more talk of poets."

Alfred Kerr

"An epic subject of gigantic proportions. The history of the beginnings of a war in speculation and big business. A small cause, a gigantic effect. In

the hands of Scribe a glass of water.⁴ Today the discovery of an oil well. In Scribe, private intrigue; today, the struggle between industrial groups. It is clear that differently constituted group conflicts cannot be presented with the techniques of plays of courtly intrigue.

"Lania's *Boom* has traveled the distance between a glass of water and an oil well. An excellent beginning. A beginning from nothing. A pantomime first sets out the theme; and epic commentary continues it. The style has emerged at the same time as the subject. An exemplary piece of cooperation between script writers, director, stage designers, actors. If the comedy had expanded from this point and had embraced ever-widening circles, then what would have emerged would not have been a masterpiece, or one peculiar high-quality performance but something more important: a blueprint for future stage works grouped around a complex, a ground plan for group plays, a scenario for collective fates.

"But then a gap appears. A similar process to the recent Eisenstein film.⁵ The times cry out for the epic treatment of major topical subjects, the theater and the cinema reorganize; they revitalize their modes of expression. But the old stage and film conventions demand their rights and impede the new beginnings with their old conventions. Piscator's production is the most solid thing he has done this season."

Herbert Ihering

"There can be no question that the problem approached here is a thousand times more important, a thousand times more topical than the love-pangs of some beautiful soul, or the psychological dislocations of lyrical youths or other 'human problems' that are dealt with zealously and fully in bourgeois literature. It takes all the stupidity of bourgeois men of letters to find this subject "boring" and "sober," whereas we are supposed to be interested in discovering the feelings of boy X at killing his father or Lady Y after her seventeenth adultery, or of sex-killer Z as he goes about his business.

"All this is funny, gripping, colorful, lively. All this has a healthy, biting sharpness: sulphuric acid which eats into the oily pacifist phrases and the evangelical messages of the League of Nations, and unmasks the swindle and unscrupulousness of the capitalist system with grotesque sharpness. From these elements and in this play something like a witty political caricature with a touch of opera and revue could emerge if only . . .

4. Eugène Scribe (1791–1861), prolific Parisian writer of well-made conversation pieces, his best-known the comedy, *A Glass of Water* (*Un Verre d'Eau*), to which Ihering alludes.

5. Shortly before reviewing *Boom* in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* (4.11.28), Ihering had reviewed Eisenstein's *Ten Days That Shook the World* (4.3.28), in which he also discerned artistic regression. The intrusion of official historiography made it "a pathos-laden celebration rather than an epic work of art."

"If only the theme: struggle for oil, gigantic imperialist conflicts, basis for the coming world war, were not so great, so comprehensive and so shattering that whenever Lania and Piscator attempt to come to grips with it their creative control breaks down!

"So what emerges is: one cannot capture decisive problems of today's world in a plot whose conception has a touch of the operetta. This is the decisive point."

Rote Fahne, Berlin, April 12, 1928

Boom ran for no more than four weeks to dwindling audiences. The end of the first stage of my theater began to announce itself.

INTRODUCTION

The Piscator-Bühne Studio was set up in October, 1927, to provide a framework within which the techniques of political theater could be explored and developed. It offered theory courses and practical exercises. The former were nominally under Piscator's supervision and covered various aspects of acting and staging. The classes were conducted by senior members of the company and were open to the whole company as well as to interested outsiders. According to the Studio's progress report at the beginning of December Fr. Wellhöner's voice class and Erwin Kalser's stage-craft had begun, whereas the classes of stars like Tilla Durieux and Alexander Granach had not, and there are no other records of how this side of the Studio developed, apart from Franz Jung's jaundiced account in *Der Torpedokäfer*, where he suggests the top actors turned a blind eye to the Studio's activities, in particular physical training. For the practical exercises the Studio was initially split into three groups: an experimental production unit to stage Jung's *Homesickness* (*Heimweh*) and Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds*, a fairy tale research unit, and a political demonstration unit. The organization was informal and members moved freely from one unit to another; members of all groups were involved in the two productions, and it was Busch and Lindtberg from the second unit who eventually performed in a Max Hölz demonstration. To Piscator's regret, play production came to dominate the Studio's activities and by the end of the season it had shown four productions in public.

The first was *Homesickness*, which was presented as a matinee at the Nollendorfplatz on January 8, 1928. It was directed by Leonhard Steckel (1901-71), an actor who was to have a distinguished career after 1933 in Zurich, where he was the first German Galileo and the first Puntila in Brecht's *Galileo* (1943) and *Baron Puntila and his Man Matti* (1947), respectively, as well as director of, among others, Brecht, Frisch and Dürrenmatt. *Homesickness*, in four acts, showed four situations involving "homeless people." A local girl dances with a Malayan in a Rotterdam bar, pleading for "one more night." When she sits down, exhausted, he dances on, alone and impassive. A phonograph blares. Three sailors brawl. Blackout. Lights up on sailor holding unconscious Malayan. Blackout. Girl cries out, "Rudolf." Body falls. Girl laughs shrilly. Sounds of running, panting. Sailor, "I've got you this time . . ."