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THE DRAMATIST AS SOCIAL CRITIC :
Left-Wing Dramatic Literature of the Weimar Republic.

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SUMMARY

Dramatists have used their work to express criticism of the prevailing social order since the first beginnings of drama itself. While they by no means invented critical drama, the playwrights of the German Weimar Republic nevertheless brought such outspoken topicality and political controversy to the theatre that they seemed to be inventing a wholly new form. This was variously known as Tendenzdrama, politisches Theater or Zeittheater.

The rise of socially critical drama in the years following the establishment of the Republic in 1918 followed the lively, experimental dramatic tradition of Expressionism and gave voice to a serious concern with modern social conditions and political developments. At the height of the Zeitstück's influence in the late 1920s it was commonly assumed by writers of all political shades that a dramatist's first responsibility was to preach a political doctrine or expose social evils; the theatre's major concern was no longer entertainment or artistic excellence but denunciation and persuasion.

The authors of Tendenzdrama were soon obliged to adapt existing dramatic techniques or invent new ones in order to present a complex modern society on stage and to convince audiences of the truth of their portrayal or the desirability of a particular ideology. Among the new developments were Piscator's use of film, projection and complex stage machinery and Brecht's establishment of the

basic rules of epic theatre; through these two innovators in particular, Zeittheater achieved an importance beyond that of specific relevance to its own age.

The decline of Expressionism and the emergence of Neue Sachlichkeit which can be observed in the literature of the Weimar Republic is also reflected in the Tendenzstücke of the era as a gradual progression from passive to active characters, from generalised social discontent to specific attack, and from vaguely expressed ideals to a distinct political ideology. Expressionist drama showed powerless idealists struggling against evils more symbolically than realistically expressed, inspired by only indistinct visions of reform or revolution. The heroes of the final phase of Weimar drama are much more active and aware: they have a party and an ideology to back them up, a precise grasp of what is amiss with the world, and are set specifically in the Germany of the early 1930s. That they are still unable to achieve their aims is shown to be the consequence of the growing political reaction rather than of their own failings - a pessimistic but accurate picture of the last years of the Republic.

The left-wing Zeitstück became more extreme but also declined during this period, for reasons both literary and political, and the NSDAP's assumption of power in 1933 brought all critical drama to an abrupt end. The Tendenzdrama written in exile exerted some influence but its scope was perforce limited. In the 1960s, however, the rise of documentary theatre showed that the

Weimar concept of drama as social criticism had survived; theatre once again became a controversial forum for the thoughtful analysis of contemporary society.

STATEMENT

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published by another person, except where reference is made in the text of this study.

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