

SCHOOL THAT CAME TO STAY

Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop, Now Celebrating Tenth Anniversary, Hopes to Become a University

By ARTHUR GELB

TEN years ago, when Erwin Piscator proposed that the New School for Social Research set up a drama department, he envisioned the eventual growth of this unit into a University of the Theatre where students trained in every conceivable phase of the drama would be eligible for bachelor, master and doctorate degrees.

The department was christened the Dramatic Workshop and, under the leadership of the former German stage director, it expanded so rapidly that it soon became a school within a school. This year, as it celebrates its tenth anniversary, it marks its recently achieved independence as a separate educational institution, boasting two leased theatres for the benefit of its large student body.

During a decade of existence, the Workshop has made several noteworthy contributions. For instance, it gave Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" its hearing before it became a film and produced such original plays as Sartre's "The Flies." The school also has been indirectly responsible for a number of experimental, off-Broadway groups. Founded by Workshop graduates, these include On Stage, Studio 7, the Interplayers, Off-Broadway Inc. and We Present.

The Workshop's courses are accredited by the New School toward a Bachelor of Arts degree. But for Mr. Piscator this is not enough. He continues to strive toward his ultimate goal of establishing a degree-giving drama university.

Plans for Security

"We're gradually getting there," he said the other day, adding that the school is at work on plans to raise enough money to purchase its own building and make itself financially secure, which is one of the prerequisites for state recognition of a university.

Mr. Piscator, who has always been the guiding spirit of the Workshop, came to this country in 1939 as a political refugee from the Nazis. He is now 56 years old and is the possessor of a thick head of silver hair combed straight back from a widow's peak, a ruddy face, thin lips and the burning gaze of a man dedicated to an idea.

Soon after his arrival in New York, he went to work on his idea for a drama school, which he often dreamed about while putting on plays in Europe. His proposal was met with immediate approval by Dr. Alvin Johnson, who has since

retired as president of the New School.

With twenty pupils and a faculty of ten, the first semester of the Workshop got under way just a decade ago. On its staff were John Gassner, who taught history of the drama; Stella Adler, who conducted courses in acting; Theresa Helburn, who instructed incipient playwrights in their chosen craft; Brooks Atkinson, who communicated the esoteric art of criticism, and Piscator himself who, with great vigor and a thick German accent, taught the tenets of "epic" directing. Today, with a staff that has increased fourfold, only Gassner and Piscator are left of that first illustrious assemblage.

First Presentation

By the end of the first year, the Workshop established an experimental studio theatre and offered its first production, "King Lear," with professional actors in the leading roles. Students played minor parts, understudied the main roles, helped build the sets and make costumes and carried out such chores as ushering. They also were able to watch Piscator direct.

Following "King Lear" came offerings like "Any Day Now," by Philip Jordan; "The Criminals," by Ferdinand Bruckner; "Nathan the Wise," by Gotthold Lessing; "Winter Soldiers," by Daniel James, and an adaptation of Tolstoy's "War and Peace." In 1943, however, the studio theatre had to discontinue operation because the stage unions demanded that only union help be employed at wages the Workshop claimed it could not afford to pay.

An all-student repertory theatre, which is still in progress, replaced the studio theatre. In the last seven years, fifty productions have been added to this repertory and such plays as "Twelfth Night," "The Flies" and "All the King's Men" have been presented over and over again. As part of the school's curriculum, students are required to attend the plays and evaluate them for class assignments.

With 225 full daytime students and 200 evening students the Workshop left the New School last June to establish itself as an independent organization. With independence came financial headaches. The Workshop's income of \$250,000 a year, according to Mr. Piscator, is not sufficient to meet expenses of its two theatres, which is another reason why the fund-raising campaign is being planned.

The theatres operated by the Workshop are the President at 247 West Forty-eighth Street, for

which the school pays \$16,000 annual rental, and the Rooftop at 111 East Houston Street, at a yearly cost of \$9,000.

Plays are selected for these theatres, Mr. Piscator said, "from the standpoint of what the students will learn in putting them on." Productions so far this season have ranged from classical to the most modern problem play and even a few musicals, including "Bloomer Girl."

Hundreds of scripts are received by the school's reading department every year from the Workshop's own playwrighting students and teachers and from dramatists all over the country. Workshop playwrights hold frequent seminars in which they read aloud and criticize each others' scripts.

Plays decided upon for production are cast from an actors' pool, for which the entire student body except first termers is eligible. In most productions, the main idea with which Mr. Piscator attempts to imbue his students is the importance of the so-called "epic theatre" in stirring an audience.

Audience Participation

"In the epic theatre," Mr. Piscator explains, "the audience is made to feel that it is a part of the play's action and that it is accompanying the actors on stage. In some cases, the actors may turn directly to the audience and address it. Slides may be projected on a screen, if necessary, to help make a play's action as clear as possible. In this way the theatre becomes an educational institution in which the only criterion is the search for truth."

There is no box-office admission for Workshop presentations. Besides the matriculated student body, the audience is composed of non-matriculated "students" who register for Course 501, called "The March of Drama Repertory." Twenty thousand persons enrolled in this course last year.

Productions are generally put on from Oct. 1 to June 1. During the summer, a group of Workshop pupils goes to Lake Placid for ten-week courses at the school's summer theatre, where the students work as apprentices, painters and designers as well as actors.

The school proudly points out such graduates as Marlon Brando, Chandler Cowles and Elaine Stritch, who were full-time students, and Tennessee Williams, who took courses under Miss Helburn and Mr. Gassner. A great many of the alumni, Mr. Piscator said, have found jobs in Hollywood and on Broadway in minor roles.