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The Chinese Theatre in the Trenches

*Like the Army These Theatre Workers Go to the Front
Aware of the Dangers, But Aware Also of the Sig-
nificance of Their Efforts to Aid the Chinese
People and the Peace Loving World at Large*

By AGNES SMEDLEY

(The following is a letter from the well known novelist and writer addressed to Ben Irwin, national secretary of the New Theatre League.)

I've been very occupied lately working with the Dramatic League here which, in spite of the fact that there's a war going on, has many active units. One section is the "Front Service Group" which leaves today for the anti-Japanese front to do active agitation and propaganda work among our own and other troops and among the people. There are some twenty-five members of this troupe.

We are trying to introduce the mass chant for educational work among the peasants and town and village workers, and among the troops, and it is this form that I have suggested to Miss Wu Kwang-Wei, leader of the front theatrical group. We need material, plays, very badly.

We are in a war and we here are living and going to fight on a diet of millet and a few vegetables. Please try to send us some scripts. They will arrive three months late but will be sent to us immediately at the front for use there.

I write now about our theatre work. I am certain other of our people also write. Our theatre came with the Red Army from the theatrical groups in main cities where formerly there were actors touring Soviet China and playing to the troops. Each big army unit has its own special theatrical group also. The theatre is one of the chief methods of political and cultural work among the troops and the people. The Peoples' Anti-Japanese Red Army, as it is now called, still has excellent theatrical troupes right at the front, including singing and dancing corps.

Anti-Japanese Dramatic Club

Here in the center, Yenan, there is one big club or center where all the theatrical groups present plays, all under the name of the Anti-Japanese Dramatic Club. The Anti-Japanese University here has from 1,500 to 2,000 students, organized in military formations like a regular army. Many detachments have their own dramatic groups, and give plays to their detachment, to the army and to the public generally. There is a corps of men and women, and a group of children, drawn from the University as a whole, who make acting a part of their regular work.

Some of these groups have few equals in any land. The acting standards are very high. I have seen the theatre in the U.S.S.R., in France, Germany and America, as well as in other parts of China. In some parts of China, the acting and production is mediocre due to past suppression of cultural activity. But I have seen plays here in Yenan that can rank with the best in any land, with a quality of acting that is outstanding.

Most of the plays are written right here individually or collectively or taken from other parts of the country, or are foreign plays adapted to the Chinese situation.

All of them are intensely realistic, and apply to the immediate urgent needs of China.

Most of the current plays deal with some phase of the national struggle, for national unity of the Chinese people. All are progressive plays, and many are very clever, directed against the ancient Chinese superstitions, for public and personal hygiene, for the Latinization of the Chinese language, etc.

It is astounding the speed with which plays can be produced when necessary. I saw a girl get the script of her role in Gorki's "Mother" one afternoon. The play was to be given the next night, about 30 hours later. She is a trained actress, of course. But she memorized her role and played the chief role in "Mother" the next night. The same holds true of the writing of plays, in fact the theatre here is a veritable flying cavalry of trained theatre workers utilizing their art to the highest social purpose, as an educational force for the unity and freedom of their country.

Ballads, Pantomines and Dramas

To give a list of plays produced here would be a tremendous task. There have been hundreds of productions since I returned here in January of this year. They range from recitations of ballads on popular themes, on through the rich and ever changing repertoire of little plays, dancing pantomines, and dramas of the Children's Dramatic Group, to the full serious plays, like "Ah Q," by the late Lu Hsien, dean of Chinese letters. "Ah Q," presented here in the midst of war, can rank with the finest plays presented abroad at any time.

There have been many other plays of high quality. One of them, "The Secret," by the Spanish playwright, Ramon Sender, based on the present struggle for democracy in Spain. When this play was given I heard the song, "Defend Madrid" sung in Chinese for the first time. It was sung first by a part of the audience, the trained singers from the university, then by the whole theatre, a rousing blood surging song.

We have had other plays, too, on every episode of the Chinese struggle against Japanese imperialism. The close connection between these productions and the lives of the audience are evidenced by the fact that often these plays lead to immediate spontaneous discussion and criticism from the floor of the theatre.

I saw one play, "Mother of the Nation," advocating terrorism, produced here. The moment it ended Lin Piao, the famous Commander of the First Front Red Army Corps, and at that time director of the University here arose to his feet to challenge the play, and precipitated an exciting discussion.

Flying Squadron

The theatrical group now going to the front consists of about 20 men and four women, led by Miss Wu Kwang, a young woman from Peiping with great talent. So far they are prepared with six plays, three of them based on the anti-Japanese struggle and the others based on recent struggles in other parts of China. This group will be a "flying squadron" troupe, playing for the Anti-Japanese Red Army, for the Kuomintang troops, to the people in the towns and often in the case of temporary defeats remaining behind in the villages to inspire the inhabitants with renewed struggle. They are writing new plays now and I'm going to try my hand at a chant for them though I hardly know where to begin. I'm going to the front with the troupe as a war correspondent. This is my last communication from here, unless something happens to prevent my going.

If I ever send you news of the death of actors or actresses at the front killed by Japanese bombs, bullets or bayonets, remember well your Chinese theatrical colleagues who go to the front fully realizing that it may mean death for many of them. Like the army these theatre workers go to the front aware of the dangers but aware too of the significance and importance of their efforts to the Chinese people and to the peace-loving world at large.



Bonnell

Drawing by BONNELL