

Leningrad Comedy Theater Wins Acclaim of Moscow Audiences

By L. MARKOV

THE SUCCESS enjoyed by the Leningrad Comedy Theater—incidentally, one of the best of its kind in the Soviet Union—during its recent performances in Moscow was added proof of the popularity of this theater with Moscow audiences and evidence of the interest in the comedy genre in general.

For, whatever the enemies of the Soviet Union might say to the contrary, satire and comedy are widely cultivated

in this country, and comedy performances invariably draw full houses. True, the days of "laughter through tears" have long since passed here. This does not mean, however, that laughter has been "banned" from the stage, as our calumniators claim. Soviet people enjoy a good laugh at themselves as much as people anywhere else. There are still enough survivals of the past in Socialist society to provide targets for the humorist. Soviet satire does not only strike at the evils of the capitalist world in plays like "Island of Peace" or "The Russian Question," it also flays the survivals of the old psychology still to be encountered in Soviet life.

The bureaucrat who is indifferent to the interests of his country and his fellow citizens is relentlessly ridiculed in the popular comedy "Caliph for an Hour." "Meeting With Youth" deals with narrow-mindedness and conservatism in business and personal life and the fear of striking out into new fields in science. The latest dramas, "The Great Force" by B. Romashov and "Law of Honor" by A. Stein, flay the worship of everything foreign to which some Soviet intellectuals are still prone.

"Of Friends and Comrades," one of the plays the Leningrad Comedy brought with it to Moscow, is about war veterans who return to their peaceful occupations after the war is over. One of the ex-soldiers feels that he has done enough for his country and decides to sit back and "enjoy life" at the expense of others. Side by side with the consideration displayed for Soviet war veterans, the play shows what bureaucratic obstacles can be created by incompetent petty officials who are indifferent to the rate of their fellow citizens. The fact that the negative characters in the play are not caricatured adds to the effectiveness of the satire.

One of the plays presented in Moscow by the Leningrad theater was a comedy of a new type in which there are no negative characters. It merely pokes fun at worthy folks who find themselves in awkward and humorous situations. "Taimyr on the Wire" deals with the adventures of a young man who comes to Moscow to supervise the shipment of equipment and materials for the industrial development of a remote island in the Arctic.

The action takes place in a room on the 13th floor of the Moskva Hotel. The hero, waiting for a long-distance call to be put through from Taimyr, is unable to leave the room to attend to his innumerable affairs and the three other people who happen to be sharing the room with him that night (all four visitors to Moscow had arrived too late at night to be given separate rooms) undertake to do his errands for him, although each one of them has urgent business of his own to attend to. The theater shows that it is not by chance that complete strangers volunteer to help a fellow citizen under such circumstances. For it is in the nature of Soviet people to be vitally interested in anything that concerns the welfare of society and the state.

The brilliant direction by that distinguished comedy producer Nikolai Akimov, combined with the superb acting of some of the best members of the Leningrad Comedy troupe, resulted in a swift-moving production that is both entertaining and instructive.

No less successful was "Island of Peace," a satire on contemporary capitalist society by the late Yevgeny Petrov. It is the story of an English bourgeois who in his avowed

desire for peace retires to a remote island where he is instrumental in starting a civil war when oil is discovered there.

The social significance of this satire is subtly brought out by the theater which shows that capitalism inevitably gives rise to wars advantageous to the rich who derive fabulous profits from them.

The Leningrad Comedy Theater also presented such classical masterpieces as "Twelfth Night" and Lope de Vega's "The Widow of Valencia." In the latter, Nikolai Akimov with the assistance of T. Yunger, the charming star of the theater, exposes the hypocritical morals of the Spanish aristocrats.

Last but not least, the Leningrad theater showed Moscow audiences its latest production "In the Name of Life" by the Tur Brothers, dedicated to the memory of Sofya Kovalevskaya, the great Russian woman mathematician, and her sufferings in tsarist Russia. Whereas other theaters presented this play as a drama, the Leningrad Comedy made it a scathing satire on the conservatism and backwardness of the former "high priests of science" who drove women out of the "temple" of knowledge. This satire strikes also at modern bourgeois reactionary scientists who fence science off from the people and place it in the service of the capitalists.

Everything shown by the Leningrad Comedy bears the unmistakable stamp of true mastery of stagecraft. This explains why it succeeded where other theaters failed. Nikolai Akimov, the producer, is an artist who has staged some first-rate productions in other theaters besides his own, including the famous Moscow Art Theater.

The company of the Leningrad Comedy includes such distinguished comedy artists as the aforementioned Yunger, V. Benyaminov, renowned for his grotesques, and A. Bondi, a first-rate actor and writer of comedies. Many actors trained by the Comedy were "kidnapped" from it by other playhouses. The Moscow Art Theater, for instance, took I. Gosheva, an extremely clever comedienne; the Moscow theaters of drama and satire "lured away" L. Sukharevskaya and B. Tenin, two stars in the Soviet comedy firmament.

Of the technical skill of N. Akimov one might say a great deal. Perhaps the following example selected at random from a host of arresting tableaux and ingenious mis-en-scenes will give some idea of his mastery.

In "Old Friends," a lyrical comedy showing the chastity in the relationships of the Soviet youth, there is a scene in which a couple of youngsters just out of school confess their love for each other. The two young people wander all night long, hand in hand, through the streets of Leningrad talking of love and life. A delightful panorama of Leningrad on a "white night" passes before the spectator.

There are long pauses when, contrary to all tradition, the stage is empty. For example, there is the scene on the canal embankment at dawn. The stage is empty and the only sound is a poignant Chaikovsky melody coming over the street loudspeaker. For a minute or two nothing happens. Then, slowly from around the corner appear the two lovers. They exchange no more than a few words, pause for a while on the bridge to look down at the water and then wander on again out of sight. This device conveys the mood of the scene more effectively than either dialogue or action.