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"REPORT FROM CHINA"—SACU sponsors give their individual impressions at Church House, Gt. Smith Street, London, S.W.1 at 7.30 pm on November 16. Chairman: Prof K. W. Wedderburn Adm: 2/6 Non Members: 4/-

NOVEMBER, 1965

Robert Bolt on Chinese Theatre

Robert Bolt, the playwright, recently returned from a three-week visit to China, sponsored by SACU. He was the guest of the Chinese Foreign Cultural Association. In an interview he offered SACU NEWS some of his impressions of the changes taking place in the contemporary theatre of China.

Question: What cities did you visit?

Mr Bolt: Mainly Peking, but also Sian and Loyang down near the Yellow River. We asked to see these two because they are both big new industrial centres and very ancient capitals.

Question: Did you find a significant difference in local styles of drama?

Mr Bolt: Slightly different. Of course there are several hundred different styles of opera, but with this very refined and elaborate technique one would need to be an expert to note the differences. Although all Chinese opera is so strange to our eyes that it looks to be one convention, even I could see differences between Peking opera and those, I suppose, more rustic operas we saw in the south.

Question: Did you see plays as well as opera?

Mr Bolt: Opera seems to be the great form, but I did see one straight play, a very successful play running there at the moment called 'War Drums Along the Equator,' about the Belgian Congo. As far as I know they are not doing any plays at all from the outside — or films. Perhaps a few people read works from the outside, but the ordinary theatre-going public doesn't see anything which isn't Chinese.

Question: What sort of audiences did you encounter? And what kind of theatres?

Mr Bolt: The halls that I was in were not particularly huge, good big halls alright, miner's halls, worker's clubs, and of course in Peking actual theatres with a capacity of — guessing — 2,000. Full, quite full, and on the whole very proletarian audiences. There is no question of this, genuine worker's audiences. Price of the tickets, say nine-

pence. Whole families there, young families with children, including babies at the breast. The children run about between the seats while the parents talk to one another. There is no politeness; they come to be entertained and if they are not, they go on talking. The curtain goes up on a terrific babble, then the actors come on and have to get a hold of their audience. These potentially enthusiastic but quite implacable audiences would give an English actor a nervous breakdown.

Question: Then would you say that this predominantly youthful and proletarian audience determines the tone of the productions?

Mr Bolt: Unquestionably. In fact I'm sure that this is at the back of the very controversial move in the classical opera. To begin with, it simply is not true that the classical opera is being stamped out. I myself accept completely as being sincere the claim of the regime that what they want to do is to adapt that particular form to modern themes, and this seems to be a very worthwhile thing to do. On the other hand, they are a bit shifty about what they've done exactly with the Peking opera. Naturally the first thing I asked was, 'Is it true that you have obliterated the Peking opera?' They laughed and said, 'Rubbish, we perform them quite a lot.' Yet as far as I could make out they are performed only twice a year, once at the October celebrations and again at May Day, and then only for about a week. Of course those two times are when Peking is full of foreign visitors. My guess — and it is only a guess — is that they perform those mainly as some kind of a shop window.

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More SACU Branches Being Formed

ACTIVE preparations are now going on in Birmingham and Merseyside for the establishment of branches in those areas.

Those who are interested are asked to contact the secretaries of the provisional committees. The Rev V. B. Molgaard, 100 Church Hill Road, Birmingham 20, and Mr F. R. Brunson, 118 Beckett's Lane, Chester (Merseyside).

In Barnet, plans are also well advanced for an Inaugural Meeting in January. Those interested please contact the secretary of the provisional committee, Mr P. G. Warland, 9, Sefton Avenue, N.W.7. The Hampstead branch which was inaugurated September 18 held a reception for the Chinese Charge d' Affaires on October 23, and is holding a public discussion meeting at Friends Meeting House, Heath Street, Hampstead on November 25 at 7.30. Speakers will be Mr Derek Bryan, Secretary of SACU and Mr Percy Timberlake, editor of the China Trade and Economic Newsletter, who has recently been in China.

Apart from these activities, we are providing speakers for a number of organisations and groups in many parts of the country. In our experience a public meeting on China often results in uncovering much latent interest, and this leads to the formation of active working groups which go on to prepare the formation of branches.

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But the question is really rather superficial, because from the modern operas which I saw there is no doubt at all that they are genuinely struggling with this problem of retaining the very tight, very hard, highly artificial convention of movement, music, dance and singing, and putting it at the disposal of modern themes. And it is an enormous problem, a very interesting aesthetic problem. They are all highly propagandist, these plays — workers struggling against the Japanese, the Kuomintang, the landlords. Here is a case in point where I felt the problem had been tackled in the wrong way, speaking aesthetically of course. The brave worker is being cross-examined by the cruel and inept Japanese commander, who stands behind the worker's chair attempting to corrupt him. He is alternately singing and chanting, moving in a very stylised way with his hands outstretched, his eyes staring, pacing and leaping about. Meanwhile the worker, the hero of the play, in order to demonstrate his bravery and indifference to all these blandishments, has been given an enormous briar pipe with a pouch of tobacco and matches. He is doing a lot of funny business with his pipe in a completely naturalistic way which, of course, absolutely destroys what the Japanese commander is doing. Now this does have the effect of putting the worker in command of the situation and of making the Japanese commander look an idiot, but it also has the effect of making the whole Peking opera convention look an idiot. Because if you juxtapose on the stage a highly naturalistic business with a highly formalised convention, there is no doubt, ever, which wins. And if they try to make a subtle mixture of naturalism and convention, I don't think there can be any doubt that eventually the naturalism will drive out the convention.

On other occasions it seemed to me the thing had been absorbed. For instance, in an opera which I saw in Sian, there was a terrifying scene in a prison cell, the most brutal thing I've ever seen on the stage, which culminates with a twelve-year old child being hung up by its heels and beaten to death. This is almost unmanageable stuff, except that the convention was made very, very, tight. It became a dreadful ritual, with the result that it carried. Nonetheless, for the moment what is happening is that these modern plays dip in and out of convention, and this is the aesthetic problem they are battling with. I think they are correct in doing so. Remember, they are dealing with a largely non-intellectual audience, and

this is cropping up all over the world — the unwillingness of the modern audience to discipline itself sufficiently to understand a hard, elaborated convention.

Question: How are the actors trained?

Mr Bolt: Here is another area where they are attempting to preserve discipline. Children are recruited at the age of nine and have an eleven year training. Competition is keen, for acting is regarded as a worthwhile, even glamorous trade, though it is not particularly highly paid. They are chosen for natural abilities which must include agility of body, as they've got to be acrobats, a voice capable of becoming a singing voice, plus a fair amount of intelligence. They are put through a gruelling training, the whole emphasis of which is on retaining the purity of the old convention. The teachers are former actors. Their sole concern is that the children should get the movements exactly right, that their little fingers should be in precisely the correct position when they come out of their hair-raising aerial somersaults. In dancing and miming classes they were making completely arbitrary and stylised movements, the very opposite of, say, the Method school of acting. But in China they are not merely paying lip-service to the ancient convention and fundamentally undermining it — they are truly searching for a way to use it for modern themes.

Question: How do they compensate for the lack of gorgeous costumes in modern opera?

Mr Bolt: They don't. That is one thing which I very much wanted to discuss with them, but I was not able to meet them. In the old opera a poor man, a beggar, is dressed as a heavenly apotheosis of a beggar. The costume is brilliant — if rags, then carefully, beautifully constructed rags. It is not romanticising a beggar, but rather part of the convention that these people on stage are not real, a theatrical statement. However in the new operas they obviously feel that if they gorgeously costume poor people this would be sugaring what is in fact a very bitter pill, inviting them to accept a glamourised version of poverty. Thus costumes are completely naturalistic, making a big clash with the actions. You, the audience, are faced with an improper choice: am I to take the costume seriously or the movement seriously? This is one thing they speak about — finding new stylised movements drawn from the movements people actually make in life. I don't think it can be done consciously, rather they have to be arrived at by evolutionary process, over generations.

Question: What about the content of the modern plays?

Mr Bolt: The propaganda content is overwhelming and crude. Fortuitously the old convention lends itself, being itself so exaggerated, but in the long run I think it will confuse the aesthetic issue. At some point they are not going to want such heavy-handed propaganda and by that time these conventions will simply have become accepted as a kind of overacting, which they are not.

For example, in 'War Drums Along the Equator' — an attack against the United Nations and the United States in particular — an analysis of the Congo situation is presented with which I am fundamentally in sympathy, but in extraordinarily crude terms. The US and the UN are absolutely indistinguishable, the UN is a sort of a branch of the CIA, the Americans carry whips with which they incessantly beat the Africans, shoot them like dogs, and so forth. Yet in some ways, as well as lending itself to propagandist plays, this convention takes the worst vice out of them; events on stage are presented in such black and white terms, so pickled and crystalised that they move you in the Brechtian sense as a satisfying pattern and shape which you can grasp. Don't, I think, move you to indignation and the desire to rush out on the spot and shoot somebody. To me, the effect was oddly to diminish immediate passion, not to whip it up.

It is going to be very interesting to see if they can hold on to their conventions when they've stopped making these totally black and white plays, wherein the good triumph and the wicked, after seeming to triumph, are cast into outer darkness. When they begin to attack the more subtle and difficult modern problems then they will have a theatre which will be adaptable all over the world — certainly a kind of theatre which I myself would like to see.

Question: Did you meet any playwrights?

Mr Bolt: No, I was unable to. On the whole these plays were in fact committee pieces, rather like American films with three or four scriptwriters. Sometimes operas or plays are rewritten from successful films, then adapted again as dance. Actors are encouraged to speak their minds. There is also, I gather, a watching brief held by the party as the play is written, to make sure that nothing untoward is said, but that everything which should be said is said and well said. It is difficult to say anything

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CHINESE THEATRE

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about the quality of the writing, as I don't speak Chinese, but the plays I saw I read in translation and the lyric bits, the songs, struck me as distinctly poetic. This committee producing has great strengths. The actor can say what he wants to do and of course does that better than what he doesn't want to do. There is certainly a tremendous feeling of team spirit on the stage. You never see an actor slacking, however tiny his part, with the result that the play is one long explosion of energy.

Question: Did you have the opportunity to discuss your approach to the theatre with anyone?

Mr Bolt: No. They don't want to know your approach. In the entire visit no one asked me a question about England. Which is predictable—we are all brands to be plucked from the burning, we don't understand and they've got it tied up. It's simply a matter of the rest of the world coming round to seeing that they are right.

Yet despite this violent propaganda, I did not see that they are militaristic or aggressive in mood. Immaculately self-righteous, yes, but not aggressive. Their interest in the rest of the world is slight—the Albanians have nearly got it right, the US is the uttermost pole of wickedness, the rest is more or less wrong and the particular refinements of our wrongness are not of much concern. They are, naturally enough, bedazzled and enchanted by what they have done already, done more or less with their fingernails—and it really is a miracle.

Question: Did you particularly find China sufficiently stimulating that, if you lived there, you would continue to write?

Mr Bolt: Who can answer such a question? I felt extremely torn in my mind. Very enthusiastic about construction work, particularly in the countryside. If I lived in Red China I think what I would like to be more than anything else is an irrigation engineer. Bringing water to this largely barren land, producing food for people who are starving—this must be an almost god-like activity. But to write under this regime would be, for me personally, very depressing. Because I have the individualistic attitude to my work which Western writers tend to have. To have somebody sitting at my shoulder who was not necessarily a writer, dictating to me how the values of my story should be shaped, would, I think, inhibit me from writing altogether. But I don't know.

HARVEST AND RURAL MEDICINE

Summer and autumn harvests have been good, according to Peking reports. Despite unfavourable weather in certain important grain areas—such as Honan and Hopei provinces—yields have been higher than in 1964, and industrial crops such as cotton and sugar-cane have proved to be the best for years. These increases are generally put down to a big extension of irrigation works, the application of more fertiliser, and the use of improved seeds.

An interesting insight into the ways in which the peasants are being introduced to better methods of farming was given in recent reports on the experiences of teams of agricultural experts. These teams are made up of six or seven people, specialists in other branches of agriculture. Accompanied by a projectionist and a representative from one of the State bookshops, and taking with them films and slides, scientific books and laboratory instruments, they travel round the countryside propagandising the work of successful communes, the best methods of controlling pests, ways of obtaining higher cotton yields, and so on. Among subjects dealt with by these teams in the last three or four months have been the more effective use of insecticides, methods of rice cultivation, and better care of draught animals.

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'A pediatrician in every rural clinic' is one of the achievements of Kiangsi province's rural health network, and indicates the success of a programme which began only in 1956. An important aim was to persuade medical personnel to make their homes in the villages, and according to a report from Nanchang, the provincial capital, more than 20,000—doctors, young medical graduates, nurses and public health workers—have volunteered for this work in the past few years.

This is only a small part of a nationwide movement to set up adequate medical services in the countryside. One target is the establishment of a comprehensive system based on commune hospitals, supplemented by mobile medical teams. Between February and June 1,600 teams, comprising 29,000 doctors and other medical personnel from the cities, toured the countryside, giving treatment, advising on preventive measures, and training selected members of the communes as spare-time helpers or midwives. These teams have now been replaced by others.

Can You Help?

THESE LINES from the office staff are to describe what we have been doing and to ask for your help.

Our premises are now very pleasantly habitable and we have had a very enjoyable 'At Home' for a group of Chinese students now studying English in London and those of our members who have been for the past few months at our beck and call when we have had an onrush of work. For our members who could not be there (the room holds only fifty people) we hope to have more occasions of this kind—the nicest way to get to know one another.

Our first informal discussion meeting was held on Thursday, 21 October at 7.30 pm and our Chinese conversation classes, to be held fortnightly, start on 5 November at 7 pm. Both at 24 Warren Street, (entrance Richardson's Mews).

We need help in many departments of our work: people to put finishing touches in decorating our offices, meeting room and library, e.g. framing and hanging pictures (rock rubbings, etc), hanging curtains (if any kind member who has two pairs of very large curtains they would give us we would be very grateful) and in general keeping an eye on the furnishing and maintenance of our premises. We need a vacuum-cleaner and we also need a person to help keep the premises tidy and clean regularly.

We need help in the office itself—that is a constant fact. We find that instead of a regular once a week evening, a telephone number and some indication of free time from members works better.

Our library room is almost ready for use. We already have a large number of books and magazines. We hope to have the library open to members three evenings a week. We are looking for experienced librarian and members to staff the library regularly on rota during the week.

In the line of decoration we are on a quest for a good map of China for our office. We have been told of one published in London in 1947 or 1948 by the Chinese Ministry of Information.

'China' film premiere was immensely successful artistically, organisationally and financially and we are very grateful to all who worked so hard to ensure this success. We hope to be able to arrange its showing in large centres outside of London where ever we have the makings of branches.

K.A.

SCHOOLS AND MEETINGS

MEMBERS IN SCOTLAND will be interested to know of the existence of a provisional China Today Committee. The secretary is Mr. David L. Smith, 13 Northumberland Street, Edinburgh, 3.

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ON NOVEMBER 24, Sir Richard Ackland will give an illustrated talk on his recent trip to South China. This will take place at SACU office, 24 Warren Street, London, W.1, at 7.30 p.m.

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SPEAKERS at SACU meetings in the new year include K. S. Karol and Hans Suyin. K. S. Karol is a journalist who recently did a number of articles about his trip to China, including one in the "New Statesman" for September 3, which SACU NEWS readers will find of great interest. Hans Suyin is the author of a number of books about China. Her most recent 'The Crippled Tree' will be reviewed in the next issue of SACU NEWS.

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Copies of **China Reconstructs, China Pictorial, Peking Review and Chinese Literature** are available from SACU office. Members interested, please write for details.

ABOUT SACU

Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (Founded 15 May 1965).

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Chairman: Dr Joseph Needham, FRS

Deputy-Chairman:

Professor Joan Robinson, FBA

Vice-Chairman: Mrs Mary Adams, OBE

Chairman of General Purposes Committee: Mr Ernest Roberts

Secretary: Mr Derek Bryan, OBE

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Believing that understanding between Britain and China is of the highest importance, SACU aims to make information about China widely available in order to help every interested person in Britain to make his or her own assessment.

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SACU premises at 24 Warren Street, London, W.1, include a large meeting room, a library where a wide range of Chinese publications is available, and general offices. Members are always welcome.

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SACU is governed by a Council of Management. A General Purposes Committee carries on the day-to-day work of the organisation, and Committees on the following matters are in being: membership and branches; trade unions; films; weekend schools; publications; and Central London activities.

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Membership of SACU is open to all who subscribe to the aims of the Society. Members are entitled to receive SACU NEWS monthly free of charge, use the library at head office, call upon the Society for information and participate in all activities of the Society.

Annual subscription: £1.0.0 Reduced rates (5s.) for old age pensioners and students.

OUR FIRST Week-End School at Plaw Hatch Hall at the end of October was fully subscribed very early on, and the second and third week-ends are being provisionally booked very quickly. The composition of SACU guests at Plaw Hatch in October was varied. The guests, though mostly from London, also included people from as far as Scotland. There were all age groups; in some cases families, and in others groups of friends. There were a number of people who lived in the surrounding area who came to the sessions for the day.

The next week-end school at the White House (University of Sussex) from 9 January to 11 January, should have a special appeal to teachers. Applications for this school are now being received and it is expected that the demand will be heavy. Early application is advisable. Please use the form at the bottom of the page for your application.

The programme will be as follows:

- Friday evening: Peking Opera Film
- Saturday morning: Education in China: Liao Hung-ying
- afternoon: Teaching in China Today: Delia Jenner
- evening: Illustrated Talk on Social Development since 1949: Roland Berger
- Sunday morning: Social Welfare: Mary Adams
- afternoon: Health: Dr David Adler

We will be holding two week-end schools on the same week-end (29 April-1 May, 1966) at two different centres: Bourton-on-the-Water in Gloucestershire and Scarborough in Yorkshire. The cost at both is £3 2s 6d (3 7s 6d for non-members). If you would like to book either of these week-ends, please indicate your choice on the form below.

I should like to book for the school at the White House, Isle of Thorn, Chelwood Gate, Haywards Heath, Sussex, 7-9 January, 1966.

I enclose a deposit of 10s/fee of £4 10s 0d (non-member £4 15s 0d)*

Name.....

Address.....

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*delete as appropriate.

I should like to make a provisional booking for the school at Bourton-on-the-Water/Scarborough*, 29 April to 1 May, 1966.

Name.....

Address.....

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*delete as appropriate.

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