

WASHINGTON, D.C.
STAR

E - 318,026
S - 362,408
FEB 22 1970

Weiss Turns to an Indictment of Vietnamese War

By DAY THORPE
Book Critic of The Star

DISCOURSE ON THE PROGRESS OF THE PROLONGED WAR OF LIBERATION IN VIETNAM AND THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO IT AS ILLUSTRATION OF THE NECESSITY FOR ARMED RESISTANCE AGAINST OPPRESSION AND ON THE ATTEMPTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO DESTROY THE FOUNDATIONS OF REVOLUTION.

A play by Peter Weiss. Translated from the German by Geoffrey Skelton. Also a short play, "SONG OF THE LUSITANIAN BOGEY," translated from the German by Lee Baxandall. Atheneum Press. 249 pages. \$6.95.

The very long title fixes in the mind that this play is by the author of the 1965 success, also with a very long title, familiarly known as "Marat/Sade." Weiss' drama, a pageant covering the period from legendary times through 1964, tells the heartbreaking story of a land which for more than 2,000 years has been crushed between the upper and nether grindstones of exploiter and invader. The play, which had its world premiere in Frankfurt am Main in March, 1963, should arouse great interest in the country, and keep alight the already kindled fires of controversy—if it is produced by a brilliantly imaginative director.

The proviso is of the utmost importance, for "Discourse on Vietnam" (or possibly "Vietnam/U.S.A.") is a play that in the theater will either be a monotonous polemic or an almost intolerable provocative indictment. Unusual in form, it demands unusual treatment.

The 15 actors who play the great number of parts throughout the ages represented in the play are distinguished by the color of their dress. Those in black are the natives of the country; those in white the aggressors and "their Vietnam vassals."

There are in addition slide projections and commentary through a loudspeaker.



PETER WEISS

On the page the work has difficulties which should not be evident in a successful production. The characters, both those unnamed representing a historical process, and those representing identifiable persons, Anthony Eden and John Kennedy, for example, are first introduced in a stage direction or over the loudspeaker, and then become anonymous behind the label of a number, 1 through 15. The dialogue is not in verse but a kind of rhythmic prose devoid of any punctuation whatever, even question marks. This lack makes for very slow reading. I suppose it is the hope of Mr. Weiss that it will force the actor, in memorizing his role, to himself decide upon a strong and appropriate inflection. Proust makes use of a similar device. His characters usually, perhaps always, use "said," never "replied," "wondered," "asked" or "demanded," even in conjunction with a question. Thus the writer is able to remain neutral, not adding his weight to significance which should be inherent in the words.

The play is divided into two parts. The first deals with the early history of oppression in Vietnam through the Chinese, Japanese and French invaders up to 1950 when the United States formally promised its support of France in the war in Indochina. The second concerns the American prosecution of the war after the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva treaty of 1954. The play ends with the assent of Congress in 1964 to give full power to President Johnson "to act in the way he considers urgent and necessary for the defense of freedom."

Every justification for American intervention, some now almost forgotten, is revived, identified with the person who popularized it, although I believe not in his own words. John Foster Dulles explains the domino theory: "If Vietnam falls, Laos and Cambodia will also collapse. We should lose Thailand, Burma, and Formosa, and be forced back on Hawaii . . ." Roger Kyes, deputy secretary of defense and one-time vice president of General Motors, observes: "If we can no longer control the prices of raw material our customary profit margins will be untenable." This has not much ring of truth; in any event, what we have heard since the days of the Krupps, that big business is the instigator of war, is frequently not reflected in Wall Street, where peace often seems to be bullish.

Senator John F. Kennedy is one of a number of Americans in the play who argue that the war is necessary, not because the northern regime is intrinsically evil but on the contrary because, since the north, in winning the support and freedom of the people, other "Communist" nations will be encouraged: "Only our complete personal commitment can overcome an enemy who is everywhere and at the same

time nowhere, an enemy who has the sympathies of the people and is supported by the people. Now is the time for thought and reappraisal. On our decision depends the peace of the world. To Mike Mansfield's question: "What in the opinion of the honorable junior senator of Massachusetts would be the consequence of congressional consent?" Kennedy replies: "The consequence would be war." (I doubt that Senator Mansfield ever spoke of the senator "of" Massachusetts. Other infelicities of translation are the identification of Nelson Rockefeller as the "co-owner of Standard Oil-New Jersey" and "owner of Chase Manhattan Bank"; also in the Diem episode the Secret Service should certainly have been the CIA.

Having decided that taking up hostilities from the tired hands of the defeated French, the United States, in its proper role, brings Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem to Michigan to train him in the techniques of subversion. Arthur Brandstatter, head of the school of police administration and public safety, Michigan State University, tells the story "To prepare him for his future political responsibilities Diem was called in the year fifty-two to the political research department of our university. Together with experienced members of the Secret Service and experts in guerrilla warfare we drew up a detailed plan for the administration of South Vietnam. . . . The first task in Saigon is to set up a state police department with the following institutions—interrogation rooms, internment camps, laboratories. The card index containing details of over 600,000 criminal and subversive elements will be adapted from

MORI/CDH

continued