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Remembering Martin Esslin, 1918–2002

WE RECORD with sadness the death in February of Martin Esslin, who had been an Advisory Editor of *Theatre Quarterly* and *New Theatre Quarterly* since 1972. It is a sad irony that the death of Spike Milligan, to whom Peter Barnes pays tribute on page 205, makes this the second successive issue in which we have mourned a great middle-European spirit alongside a shaping force in British theatre. It is perhaps no less ironic that Martin Esslin and Spike Milligan both made their special contributions not to live theatre but to the distinctive art of radio performance during the final years of that medium's ascendancy over television – yet the departmentalization of the BBC makes it entirely possible, even likely, that the two men will have passed each other many times in the corridors of Broadcasting House without so much as considering what might have been an extraordinary creative collaboration.

Those of us who were growing up at the time made no such distinctions. We had been as gratefully astonished at *The Goon Show* as we were soon to be by the plays of Giles Cooper, Henry Reed, R. C. Scriven, and the many new writers who found radio a sympathetic home for their early work, including Pinter, Arden, Stoppard, and Churchill.

Martin Esslin was born in 1918 of Jewish parents in Budapest, but his family soon afterwards moved to Vienna, where he was educated, and to whose university he went in 1936 to study Philosophy and English – while also attending directing classes at the Reinhardt Academy. The Nazi occupation of 1938 cut short his studies, and he spent a year in Brussels before finding what became permanent exile in Britain in 1940. He joined the BBC European Service, and stayed with the Corporation until 1977, after which, until 1988, he divided his time between London



and a professorship in drama at Stanford. In 1947 he married his wife Renate, who survives him, and they had one daughter.

Though Martin Esslin was promoted from Deputy Head to Head of Radio Drama only in 1963, his influence can clearly be felt in the earlier widening of radio drama's range from the 'poor man's theatre' at which his predecessor, Val Gielgud, had largely aimed – with a West End-style offering on a Saturday night and something a touch more challenging, as it might be from the Old Vic repertoire, on a Monday. As well as encouraging British dramatists to exploit the medium to the full, Martin also introduced continental writing, notably of course from Beckett. The creative drive in radio had previously come from the Features Department (which under the guiding hand of Laurence Gilliam commissioned the radio ballads of Parker and MacColl – another case of compartmentalizing creative minds); but by the early 'sixties it was drama which was the innovative force

in the medium, encouraging and not merely responding to the new energies in live theatre.

Just as Peter Barnes believes that it is as a writer rather than performer that we should celebrate Spike Milligan, my own feeling is that this work of Martin's will prove of more enduring significance than the critical writing for which he became and remained better known. While *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962) not only invented its own subject (and stuck on it a label which has resisted removal), its value was largely exegetic. Certainly, its encapsulated interpretations of all those weird foreign plays helpfully complemented John Russell Taylor's neat packaging of British dramatists in *Anger and After*, and the two books probably helped more students through more drama exams of the time (myself not excluded) than any before or since. But despite the freshness of the subject, and the importance of the work as an introduction, Martin's approach was, like so many critics of the period (myself not excluded), that of the director *manqué*. He wanted to tell you what the play *meant*, and so restricted imaginative freedom – precisely the freedom he allowed on radio to that plenitude of writers who owe him a lifelong debt.

His *Brecht: a Choice of Evils* had appeared in 1959, the same year as John Willett's *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*. Together, these two books brought Brecht into focus for British theatregoers, who until that time had been given few chances to encounter him on stage – one of those rare instances where critical attention has anticipated and encouraged the actuality of performance. My own interest in Brecht was sparked by these books not least because of the totally opposed views they presented – and the dialectic thus provoked in the mind of the reader. I found Willett's version of Brecht the more persuasive, but having to engage with two such compelling but contrary kinds of insight stimulated interest in the plays themselves – not by any means the invariable effect of critical works of that (or any other) time.

I first met Martin when, as a member of some student committee, I suggested inviting him as guest speaker to a study weekend on the 'new British drama' in Windsor Great

Park during the snowy winter of 1962. Unlike a good many such invitees, Martin did not simply appear, talk for an hour, sip a polite sherry, and depart: he entered fully into the lively spirit of the occasion, even staying on for the evening's play-reading – of Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. As a very briefly aspiring actor, I was grateful for his bellows of laughter at my haplessly bewildered Gus. Never one for 'knowing the right people', I just felt that this was one of the right people I had to know.

The kindest of men, and one who spread his helping hands wide, Martin readily agreed to become one of our Advisory Editors soon after the old *Theatre Quarterly* was launched, and he was an active contributor alike of articles, contacts, and ideas throughout the ten years of our first series, and well into the second. He also chaired the Commission for a British Theatre Institute established after a symposium called by the journal, in which capacity he valiantly confronted both an intransigent governmental bureaucracy and the tendency of the Commission itself to speak with the voices of the competing interests it represented rather than finding its own.

By then, Martin had become something of a guru, and I think quite relished the role – understandably, after being more or less taken for granted when his great work for radio was being done. Not that his later books were insignificant achievements. Notably, *The Field of Drama* (1987) was a valuable attempt to demystify the semiotic approaches so pervasive at the time, and none the worse for the fact that Martin was clearly battling his own way through the jargon.

Like Jan Kott, Martin was an 'asylum-seeker' from a totalitarian regime, who contributed momentously to the culture of his adopted land. He was, of course, the more closely assimilated of the two, though his voice never quite lost a recognizable middle-European edge, especially when that slightly stocky figure would lean forward, bespectacled eyes aglimmer, and urge some pertinent point into the discussion. He learned a little British reserve, but, especially where the giving of help and encouragement was concerned, never lost his continental generosity.