



New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater

I. Saal

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New Deal Theater recovers a much ignored model of political theater for cultural criticism. While considered to be less radical in its aesthetics and politics than its celebrated Weimar and Soviet cousins, it nonetheless proved to be highly effective in asserting cultural critique. In this regard it offers a vital alternative to the dominant modernist paradigm developed in Europe. Rather than radicalizing content and form, New Deal theater insisted that the political had to be made commensurable with the language of a mass audience steeped in consumer culture. The resulting vernacular praxis emphasized empathy over alienation, verisimilitude over abstraction. By examining the cultural vectors that shaped this theater, Saal shows why it was more successful on the American stage than its European counterpart and develops a theory of vernacular political theater which can help us think of the political in art in other than modernist terms.

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