

Propaganda theatre: a critical and cultural examination of the work of moral re-armament at the Westminster Theatre, London

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the rise and fall of the propagandist theatre of Moral Re-Armament (MRA), which owned the Westminster Theatre in London, from 1946 to 1997. MRA operated a unique theatre movement which was initially extremely successful in taking a stand against the avant-garde drama of the twentieth century. Its own controversial plays promoted an ideology of living by four absolute moral standards: honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. My research explores the way in which MRA sought to change society through drama and investigates the reasons for the eventual demise of the Westminster Theatre operation. Because MRA theatre has not featured in secondary criticism on twentieth-century British drama, my information has been gathered from MRA archives, interviews with key figures associated with the movement and a performance in London of one of its political plays. My thesis fills a gap in the history of twentieth century British theatre, which so far has not acknowledged MRA's contribution. Initially the Westminster Theatre, which was administered entirely by volunteers, was a huge success, attracting a working class audience and even helping to resolve industrial disputes. However, the movement was unable to adapt to the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Its plays became less relevant and therefore less effective and the costs of maintaining a London theatre began to soar. The final production at the Westminster in 1990 of Vaclav Havel's *Temptation* was boycotted by many MRA members and proved to be a moral and financial disaster that led to the closure of the theatre. Although MRA theatre was ultimately not sustainable, it achieved much during its fifty year existence. It delivered plays that not only promoted its ideology but dealt with controversial issues in a way that the conservative middle and upper classes could understand and gave them a voice that left-wing and experimental theatre did not. However, for propaganda to be successful it must speak the language of the people it is trying to convert. This thesis concludes that MRA theatre failed to advance beyond its post-war ideology and, as a result, its plans for a new society were doomed to failure.

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