

EXPERIMENT IN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE: An Informal History of I.A.S.T.A.

By WILLIAM PACKARD

The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Theatre Arts is an experiment in international theatre. Its studio and offices are situated at 418 W. 42nd Street, New York City. There, three times a year, visiting foreign directors work with American professional actors for a period of from six to ten weeks each. The result is a workshop production of one of the great classics of world theatre. The ultimate goal of IASTA is to revitalize the American theatre with the ideas, styles and techniques of other countries. The Charter of the Institute states that it has one goal:

to enable young American artists, in conjunction with foreign students, both to contribute towards the creation of, and to develop in, that which American theatre lacks and which is widely considered to be the finest expression of the theatre arts: the ensemble.

This idea had its origin in several trips around the world. John D. Mitchell, president and one of the founders of the Institute, had organized a study tour of the theatre arts in Europe, as part of a Columbia University program, and in 1950 he took a group to England, France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Canada. Then again in 1951, Dr. Mitchell conducted a study tour ("From Athens to Broadway") that went to Portugal, Sicily, Italy, Greece, Austria, Germany, France and England. Finally in 1954, a group went around the world, visiting the theatres of Hawaii, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Egypt, Greece, Italy and France. When he returned from this last trip, Mitchell felt that the people for whom this experience would be the most valuable, could not take part in it, either for lack of money or for lack of time. He was thinking, of course, of the American professional actor. Consequently, in the forming of IASTA, Mitchell and the other officers of the Institute set about trying to find the best way of making the resources of foreign theatre accessible to the audiences, and especially to the actors, of this country. Mitchell recalls a telephone conversation with William Inge, when IASTA was forming its board of trustees. He had said to Inge:

We want to make the impossible possible—how wonderful it would be for American actors to spend a year in Paris to study at the Comédie-Française, or a year in Moscow to study at the Moscow Art Theatre—but you and I know that that's impossible, there are all the problems of money and work-permits, and then there is the language barrier. And so instead we want to bring the foreign directors over here. They will work exclusively in English translation.

William Packard, a playwright who lives in New York, gathered material for his informal history while he was playwright-in-residence for a season at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Theatre Arts. He made the English adaptation of *Ikkaku Sennin*, subsequently produced at the Institute. This opportunity to learn stagecraft, and especially what actors can and cannot accomplish on stage, gave him, he says, much more objectivity and caused a great change in his own approach to playwrighting.