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BRECHT ON THEATRE

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Brecht on Theatre

Bertolt Brecht

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The original edition of *Brecht on Theatre,* published in 1964, marked a path-breaking contribution to the reception of Bertolt Brecht in the Anglophone world and in some instances even beyond for those who could read English but not German. In the 1960s, this master of modern drama was only beginning to be translated into other major languages, and his writings on theatre practices, if not totally unknown in Germany, were a mere rumour beyond. Editor John Willett's selection, translations and notes decisively influenced the discourse on Brecht's theatre. Who was he?

Born in 1917, Willett discovered Brecht's theatre in the late 1930s and was inspired by Brecht's noteworthy production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* that he had seen in 1949 in East Berlin; he went on to translate *The Good Person of Szechwan* in the early 1950s and wrote a lengthy, appreciative article on Brecht's plays in 1956 that caught the dramatist's attention. That led to their encounter in June 1956 to consult about preparations for the Berliner Ensemble's visit to London, which would take place just after Brecht died of a heart attack in August. He went on to become the chief promoter, editor and translator of the English-language edition of Brecht's works at Methuen, often collaborating with Ralph Manheim. Careful reader that he was, he also became an internationally recognized Brecht scholar. When he passed away in 2002, we could look back on his intellectual journey that forged the way for Bertolt Brecht to become recognized as the most influential German playwright, poet and thinker about theatre in the twentieth century.

In 1963, when Willett completed the manuscript of *Brecht on Theatre,* he considered it a provisional account. No one knew it would become the standard introduction to Brecht's writings in the Anglophone world. It is hard to imagine that at the time there existed only a thin, 291-page volume in German called *Schriften zum Theater* (Writings on the Theatre) upon which Willett based his selection.[1] The Brecht Archive was only just being organized in East Berlin, and he was able to get access to some additional

[1]Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater,* ed. by S. Unseld (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1957).

sources from the Brecht Estate through his contacts with the writer's private secretary, Elisabeth Hauptmann. Only after he had finished his own editorial work did the expanded, seven-volume edition of Brecht's *Schriften zum Theater* appear simultaneously in East and West Germany, which was too late to accommodate for his own anthology.[2]

Fifty years later, we humbly present a third edition of *Brecht on Theatre,* an edition that reflects five decades of critical scholarship, biographical clarifications and archival discoveries. In a certain sense the new editorial team is the product of John Willett's mentoring, but like all good students, we have our independent views and have carefully crafted the intellectual distance between the 1964 and 2014 *Brecht on Theatre.* We have dropped some texts because they now appear in other volumes of Brecht's writings in the Methuen Drama edition (e.g. *Brecht on Film and Radio,* 2000; *Brecht on Art and Politics,* 2003; *Brecht on Performance,* 2014). In their place we have translated over twenty additional texts to enlarge the collection and restored some of the passages Willett had left out. All of the original translations have been refreshed, updated and in some cases newly rendered into English. Willett sometimes translated too quickly and made real errors; in other instances he worked without adequate insight into Brecht's own frame of reference; his editorial approach was sometimes cavalier so that essays were abridged with no indication that material was missing, and other selections were simply conflated from different manuscript sources. More important, Willett was unable to include translations of any material that had not already appeared in German, so he was either forced to omit significant essays or had to make do with descriptions or summaries in the editorial notes. We have strived to improve upon these shortcomings in this revised, third edition, augmenting the corpus of Brecht's non-literary writings available to an English-language readership.

Our efforts have been able to draw on the editorial diligence of the German edition of Brecht's *Werke* (Works) that appeared in thirty volumes between 1988 and 1998 under the editorial oversight of Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei and Klaus-Detlef Müller. This 'Grosse Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe', published cooperatively by Suhrkamp Verlag and Aufbau Verlag and completed with a supplementary index volume in 2000, includes a much broader and definitive range of Brecht's 'theoretical'

[2]Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater,* ed. by W. Hecht, 7 vols (Frankfurt/Main and Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag and Aufbau Verlag, 1963).

writings than had been previously available, among them a large number of texts not published during his lifetime. Four of the volumes are devoted to the essays, over 3,000 pages of texts and editorial notes (*Werke* 21–24), that is, writings not classified as plays, poems, prose, journals or letters, and from these we have made our selection. The first three of these volumes comprise a strictly chronological presentation, while the fourth includes all of Brecht's essays written about his own plays (vol. 25 includes the collaboratively authored *Modelbooks* of the Berliner Ensemble, selections from which can be found in *Brecht on Performance*). Willett too chose a chronological approach in 1964, as he explained in his brief introduction: 'Too often the theory is treated as if it were a coherent whole which sprang from Brecht's head ready-made. The endless working and re-working which it underwent, the nagging at a particular notion until it could be fitted in, the progress from an embryo to an often very differently formulated final concept, the amendments and the after-thoughts. . .' (xiii). While our revision has maintained chronology as one of the organizing principles, we have not been rigid about it, having combined together notes and texts into thematic subgroupings within the three main parts, each with an independent chronology, such as the notes on the play *The Mother* in Part One, the texts about Chinese Theatre, *Verfremdung* and Gestus in Part Two and the comments on Stanislavsky in Part Three. We have also conformed to the dating as well as the (translated) titles of the German originals in the new Brecht edition.

Brecht was first perceived as a major figure in European drama and theatre, thanks to the Berliner Ensemble's touring performances to Paris and London in the mid-1950s. In the two years immediately following the Berliner Ensemble's performances in Paris in 1954, the French press provided a good deal of coverage. Roland Barthes analysed these responses and discerned four main tendencies in the criticism.[3] Although he was dealing with press commentaries in the two years leading up to Brecht's death in 1956, his categorizations can easily be applied to much subsequent Brechtian theatre criticism and academic scholarship.

1. Those on the far right view Brecht's work as utterly discredited because it is political: Brechtian theatre is mediocre because, quite simply, it is communist theatre.

[3]R. Barthes, 'The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism', *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 71–6.

2. Conservative critics separate the man from his works. The man is abandoned to politics, but his work is seen as great art – as great theatre. And it is great despite Brecht and Brecht's politics.

3. Liberal critics see Brecht as a humanist, but in order to emphasize the fact that his heart is in the right place, they denigrate the significance of his theoretical writings and dramatic principles.

4. Orthodox communists attack Brecht for not adhering to the principles of socialist realism. They criticize the absence of a positive hero in his work and its anti-illusionism, based on his rejection of mimetic realism.

Following Barthes's analysis, we may draw three main conclusions for our own time: Brechtian criticism is heavily politicized; the relationship between the aesthetic and political dimensions of his work is controversial and contentious; and the status of his theoretical writing and dramatic principles is open to question. This revised edition of *Brecht on Theatre* should help us adapt Brecht's work in and on the theatre in a meaningful way for the present time.

What does it mean to translate Brecht for the present? First, his writing initially seems easy to translate because of its clarity, and the Anglo-Saxon element of his style brings it close to us. Yet his prose is also characterized by neologisms, wit and a syntax that often resists easy transposition into English. The common faults that Willett already recognized include Germanicisms, incorrect speech rhythms, the failure to match Brecht's shifting styles (heightened and ordinary speech, for example) and a tendency to flatten his lively sense of humour and sharp invective. Like Willett, we want to convey how the texts in this collection document a process of thinking while writing. Second, Willett's translations have been around for fifty years and decisively influenced the English-language discourse on Bertolt Brecht. Consequently, we as translators need to be mindful about 'changing the rules of the game' by introducing new translations for concepts that have already entered the world of 'Brechtian English'. Moreover, the earlier Methuen volumes on film and radio, as well as art and politics, to a large extent conformed to Willett's conventions. At the same time, Brecht himself gave familiar words new meanings and introduced new words for innovative ideas as he wrestled with language to achieve the precision he sought in abstract thinking and in theatre practice. Indeed, this has been our model as we worked tenaciously to find a passable, or the best, solution among the possible ones. As a result, we have introduced some major and many minor revisions to Willett's vocabulary. Three of Brecht's key concepts in German deserve explanation here: *Verfremdung, Gestus* and *Haltung.* They have all

provoked considerable academic commentary and disagreement, and their translation also raises controversial issues, not only in relation to rendering his writings into English more generally but also in more fundamental terms: to what degree should the translation of theoretical concepts be informed by interpretative and intertextual considerations?

Verfremdung is probably the most notorious of Brecht's theoretical notions. Willett translated it as alienation and *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-Effekt* as alienation effect or A-effect. This became the standard terminology, giving rise to two fundamental misunderstandings. The first was that Brechtian theatre was cold and impersonal because he wanted his productions to alienate the audience rather than to entertain them. The second misunderstanding is more plausible. By the 1930s, Brecht was a committed Marxist, and *Entfremdung* is the term Marx uses for alienation. Before Brecht coined the term *Verfremdung* in the mid-1930s, however, he used *Entfremdung.* Marx's term refers to the socio-economic position of the worker in the labour process under capitalism, but Brecht's *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung* both refer to an aesthetic process that renews our powers of cognition. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, two further translations were in circulation: distanciation and defamiliarization. The use of distanciation, or the distancing effect, led to misunderstandings similar to those we encountered with alienation: although Brecht may not have wanted his productions to actually put the audience off, he still wanted to distance the audience from the proceedings on stage. It is, of course, true that Brecht does not want the spectator to identify with the characters on stage, but generally speaking, he uses the term 'distance' to characterize the actors' relationship to their roles, and the metaphor of decentring to clarify the spectators' relationship to the events on stage. Indeed, the term 'distantiation' reproduces the French mistranslation of *Verfremdung* as 'distanciation', which became fashionable in the 1980s, thanks to the impact of structuralism and post-structuralism. 'Defamiliarization' has stronger credentials, not least as *Verfremdung* is the standard German rendering of the Russian Formalist term *ostranenie,* and defamiliarization its English equivalent. For the Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, however, defamiliarization is an artistic technique designed to intensify our sensations and perceptions of objects in a world where authentic vision has been deadened by abstraction, so that we never see beyond the surface of reality. For Brecht, the aim of *Verfremdung* is that we should understand the world better. It enables the spectators to perceive things in a new way so that the social rules governing our actions can be revealed and so that we (the spectators)

can see how events could have turned out differently. In other words, *Verfremdung* reboots our cognitive apparatus and is grounded in a Marxist critique of ideology, whereas rendering it as defamiliarization suggests an equivalence with *ostranenie* that is theoretically misleading. For this new edition of *Brecht on Theatre,* we have thrown in the conceptual towel and chosen not to translate *Verfremdung,* rendering it in italics and capitalized; V-effect adapts the German term into an English neologism, and the verb (*verfremden*) becomes 'making strange' or 'estrange'.

We have chosen, however, to adapt Brecht's *Gestus* without capitalization or italics: gestus. Willett introduced the obsolete English word 'gest' to render the slippery, pseudo-technical term, even though it resonates more with jest (as in joke) or gist for many readers rather than with Brecht's global notion that connects theatre event, society and audience by making actions observable, pointing to the structurally defining causes behind them and enabling social critique. Etymologically Latin *gestus,* a masculine noun derived from the verb *gerere* (meaning to carry or to bear), refers to physical bearing or body movement, especially of the hand or the arm. More specifically, it alludes to a speaker's or actor's use of gesturing. The related neuter noun *gesta* in turn means action or deeds. In other words, the Latinate *gestus* refers to everything related to mime and mimicry, including facial expressions, body posture and body language, which contribute to the telling of a story. Because Brecht drew on his own experiences in articulating both *Verfremdung* and gestus, his usage changed as did his own practices. Mentioned as early as 1926, gestus accrued related meanings over time, developing into a bundle of gestus (pl.), the basic gestus, the social gestus and the gestic to describe a general form of performance. Ultimately he used the word in such an inflationary way that gestus could stand in general for Brecht's entire approach to staging theatre, that is, a central aspect of his theoretical and practical engagement with open forms of non-mimetic realism. By maintaining gestus as a 'foreign word' in our translations – it is a neologism in German as well – we also conform to many scholarly publications on Brechtian theatre theory that employ it as an analytical and performance tool referencing embodied connections to social and/or historical contexts.

'Attitude' or 'stance' is Willett's translation of Brecht's key concept *Haltung*; we have consistently rendered it as 'attitude' in this edition. The German etymology relates it to the common verb *halten* (to hold), as well as to the familiar nouns *Verhalten* (behaviour) and *Verhältnis* (relationship). In fact it is closely linked to gestus, as described earlier, and can mean both

'attitude' in the intellectual sense of a cognitive category and 'stance' in the pragmatic sense of physical comportment, combining what is usually a mental state in English with embodied expression or an actor's bearing. Brecht employed the word frequently in the second half of the 1920s to describe bodily dynamics in the context of acting, but he was himself inconsistent in the usage that changed over time. Both attitude and gestus are generated in and by the body, and gestus, as the smallest element of *Haltung,* condenses the dialectic of balance and movement. In other words, Brecht places into an intersubjective relationship the traditional understanding of gestures, facial expression and speech intonation. Together attitude and gestus represent analytical concepts that enable the actor to separate into single gestures social actions and appearances and contrast them with one another, indicating how meaning can be established, named or produced in a consistent way by the actor on stage.

There are also less noticeable changes in both the new and revised translations of this third edition. The noun *Fabel,* which has been previously translated as story or fable, is here consistently rendered as plot in Brecht's sense of the dialectically interpreted plot that is made 'playable' for a modern audience. Similarly, Brecht's touchstone phrase 'das menschliche Zusammenleben' has yielded the somewhat awkward but accurate English phrase 'the way people live together'. Generally we aimed for an English idiom we call 'mid-Atlantic', somewhere between British and American usage and without regionalisms. We have de-gendered German's masculine nouns and pronouns, usually by pluralizing them, for example, the actor/he becomes the actors/they or mankind becomes humankind. The indefinite pronoun 'one' has been rendered variously as you, we or people. Translation is an act of appropriation, and the gestus of our translations emerges in the activity of appropriation, of making these texts our own, now in the present form.

A final comment is in order on Brecht's use of the word 'experiment', or *Versuch,* a central principle of his entire approach to theatre and theatre aesthetics. It is no coincidence that he established in 1930 a publication series – de facto under the co-editorship of his collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann – entitled *Versuche* (experiments) that was aimed at presenting his latest aesthetic productions and reflections on them. Volumes 1 through 7 appeared from 1930 until 1933, at which point his works could no longer be published in Germany, so that *Versuche* 8 was printed but never distributed; upon returning to Europe, Brecht took up the series once again in its distinctive typographic design and layout suggesting a scientific journal rather than a literary magazine (see Figure 6, p. 227, for a facsimile

of *Versuche* 15), producing volumes 9 through 15. Each volume usually contained two to four individually numbered 'experiments'. The 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*' (see Part One), for example, comprise experiment 4 (*Versuch* 4) in volume 2 of the *Versuche* series, preceded by the libretto of the opera itself (*Versuch* 3). As Brecht set out in the introduction to the very first volume, the title and concept were programmatic. The experiments were not conceived as individual works but as interventions in the cultural institutions with the goal of changing them. In a larger sense, then, the concept of experiment defines a key aspect of his textual production: texts as well as performances are public events that invite the audience to intervene, to think and to act; they are to be used and discarded as needed under historically specific conditions.

Acknowledgements

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The Editors

Readers will note that editors' commentaries appear indented at the end of each Brecht text. In addition, square brackets and asterisks (*) indicate editorial explanations or additions. Footnotes inserted originally by Brecht are numbered anew at the bottom of the page, while editors' footnotes in the introductions are sequentially numbered.

PART ONE
A NEW THEATRE

INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

Brecht's early years as a playwright, from 1918 to 1933, represent possibly the most contentious, but also the most fascinating period in his career. The various controversies relating to this period were sparked by Brecht himself in 1954, in a critical assessment of the plays he wrote between 1918 and 1926, and they have continued to the present day. In more recent years, leading Brecht scholars in Germany have argued that epic theatre is not intrinsically Marxist, and have even suggested that his plays do not mark a fundamental break with the dramatic mode of theatre that he ostensibly rejects in his best-known essay on epic theatre, 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*'.

Our understanding of Brecht's artistic and intellectual development during the Weimar Republic has been significantly enhanced, thanks to the new German edition of his collected works, the *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe.* The first volume of his theoretical writings contained all the essays he had written between 1914 and 1933, except for essays specifically related to his own plays. Crucially, it incorporated a large amount of previously unpublished material, as well as revisiting the dating and editing of previously published pieces. Although the twenty or so pieces written before 1914 and 1925 add little of moment to our understanding of Brecht's early years, the most substantive difference between this and all previous editions of Brecht's early writings concerned the period from 1926 to 1932 because no fewer than 137 of the 158 newly published pieces were written during this period. The selection that follows – which should be read in conjunction with the material published in English for the first time in *Brecht on Art and Politics* – reflects this configuration. While the first six essays are from 1918, 1920 and 1925, the fifteen that follow were written between 1926 and 1933; five essays in the selection are published in English for the first time, as are expanded versions of Brecht's 'Notes' on *The Threepenny Opera, Man Equals Man* and *The Mother.* The essays are presented chronologically instead of being grouped thematically, so as not to pre-empt judgement on the nature of his development in this period.

Figure 1 One of Caspar Neher's many drawings of Baal.

Brecht and Modernism: 1918–26

From his first major play *Baal* onwards, Brecht systematically abandons the theatrical conventions of the realist and naturalist stage that had developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, associated in particular with the work of Gerhart Hauptmann and Henrik Ibsen (see the photo of the *Rosmersholm* stage set, Plate 2). These conventions perpetuated a series of illusions – that the stage set was a 'real' room whose fourth wall is removed when the curtain rises, that the individuals interacting in that room were 'real' people oblivious to the presence of the audience in the theatre and that the theatre audience itself played the role of an unseen eavesdropper – and his rejection of them is underlined in the 'Notes to *The Mother*', written as the Weimar Republic reaches its end. At the same time, it is important to remember that the anti-illusionism and self-conscious theatricality characteristic of what he would come to call epic theatre had been hallmarks of Brecht's plays from the very beginning of his career onwards, as had a discontinuous scenic structure and a provocative attitude towards the audience – features that are graphically exemplified in his first two plays *Baal* and *Drums in the Night* (see *Collected Plays: One*).

Brecht's rejection of illusionism draws on the modernist critique of representational realism that affected all forms of artistic expression in

Europe between 1890 and 1930. Modernist literature was profoundly affected by a crisis in language grounded in the premise that language could no longer adequately represent reality. Similarly, the development of modernist painting was driven by a crisis in visual representation, which led to the emergence of abstract and non-representational art forms together with the disintegration of rules of perspective that had dominated painting since the Renaissance. Modernist drama and theatre, however, were affected by a dual crisis of representation because their means of expression are both verbal and visual. Verbally, they are linguistically self-conscious, undermine dialectically structured 'dramatic' dialogue and reject realist and naturalist conventions regarding the linguistic register of their characters. Visually, they adopt the conventions of abstract and non-representational modernist art, reject realist and naturalist depictions of time and space and are theatrically self-reflexive. This dual crisis of representation is at its most acute visually in Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* and verbally in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Mimetic illusionist theatre, mediated architecturally by the picture-frame stage (or *Guckkastenbühne*), was first blown apart when the ringmaster in Frank Wedekind's *Earth Spirit* (1895) fired his pistol into the auditorium, shattering the transparent Naturalist screen that enabled social reality to be directly perceived on stage and initiating a trend that continued via Strindberg's dream plays and German Expressionism to the epic theatre of Erwin Piscator and Brecht.

Comments from 1919 to 1921 show that Brecht was well-acquainted with modernist German drama and theatre (e.g. Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* and *Gas,* and Ernst Toller's *Transformation*) and two brief texts written in 1920 detail his critique of Expressionism and Dada (*Brecht on Art and Politics,* pp. 25–6). But he also knew Strindberg's later modernist plays and the work of Wedekind. He mentions Strindberg's *Dance of Death* and in December 1921 attended a rehearsal for Max Reinhardt's production of *A Dream Play.* His biographical note 'Frank Wedekind', which opens this section, refers to Wedekind playing the Marquis von Keith and, more significant, the role of the ringmaster in *Earth Spirit,* the first of the 'Lulu' plays. *Baal* can be seen as a critical appropriation of *Earth Spirit,* not only in its theatrical self-reflexivity – scene 11, which reverses the standard relationship between auditorium and stage by being set backstage in the cabaret, mimics Act III of *Earth Spirit* – but also through its protagonist. Like Lulu, Baal is a vitalistic figure with mythic dimensions who undermines not just bourgeois society, but the entire Judaeo-Christian cultural tradition. In fact, all the plays that Brecht wrote in this early period

have been described as not just vitalistic, but also anarchic, materialistic and nihilistic – characteristics often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, who had a substantial impact on Brecht's thinking at this time.

The tendency for Brecht's views to come across as confused and contradictory is also due to his iconoclastic stance regarding not only the social and political values of bourgeois society, but also contemporary theatre and culture in his essays of 1920. By the mid-1920s, however, a more positive note may be discerned, in that Brecht began to redefine the role of the theatre spectator as questioning and analytical ('More Good Sport') and to link socially critical drama to a type of theatrical representation that does not simply 'reproduce' reality in a supposedly neutral and self-evident manner ('Three Cheers for Shaw'). Even more important, Brecht insists that theatre should be *fun*. Nevertheless, unlike Shaw, Brecht cannot be construed as a socialist at this time, and still less as a Marxist, revolutionary or otherwise. In the 1926 'Preface' to his second major play, *Drums in the Night,* the discussion of George Grosz's Marxist Dada masterpiece *The Face of the Ruling Class* focuses on Grosz's artistic motivation rather than his political stance. Similarly, Brecht's account of his own play highlights the theme of sexuality and the problematic political status of its swinish protagonist Kragler. But Brecht's analysis of the material conditions that determine human behaviour is not Marxist, and his cynical consideration of the failed Spartacus uprising of 1918/19 is insightful precisely because he refuses to perceive the German working class at the end of the First World War through the rose-tinted spectacles of revolutionary romanticism.

The Transition to Marxism: 1927–33

The years from 1927 to 1933 constitute one of the most productive and problematic phases in Brecht's career. He wrote several major plays, a series of fragments and *Lehrstück* texts, some four hundred theoretical essays and also made significant progress in developing the practice of epic theatre. His work at this time tends to be interpreted and evaluated in terms of more general reflections on his intellectual development. This period has often been seen as embodying a fundamental shift in Brecht's writing, as he first abandons the anarchistic nihilism of his early plays in favour of behaviourist materialism in the mid-1920s, and then goes on to adopt a fully-fledged Marxist position as the Weimar Republic reaches its end. His development as a playwright and as a theorist and practitioner of epic theatre has been

taken to mirror this paradigm shift in his political sensibilities – not just in terms of the new sociological preoccupations that mark the work of the late 1920s and early 1930s, but also as regards the repeated rewriting of his own plays. As well as devising new versions of early plays such as *In the Jungle of the Cities* (1923, 1927) and *Man Equals Man* (1926, 1929, 1931), he also revised *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1927, 1929) and *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) for publication in his *Versuche* volumes of 1930/1 and 1931/2.

There are, however, fundamental disagreements about the nature of Brecht's Marxism, not only in relation to the defining characteristics of epic theatre, but also in general theoretical terms. Critical approaches to epic theatre tend to be embedded in assumptions about the emergence of Brecht's Marxism. Some commentators have argued that epic theatre is only realized when Brecht abandons the behaviourism and socio-economic determinism of the mid to late 1920s and moves from an anti-bourgeois conception of theatre based on the 'shock of recognition' (see 'Dialogue on Acting') to a revolutionary type of theatre aiming at active intervention in societal processes. According to this approach, Brecht does not reach this crucial stage until 1932 with *The Mother,* so that the characteristic feature of his plays in the period from 1928 to 1931 is that they lag behind his theoretical intentions as expressed in his essays.

These controversies have been further complicated by disputes over the precise dating of Brecht's shift to Marxism. While his collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann argues that his interest in Marxism developed in 1926, it has also been suggested that he did not adopt Marxism until 1929, or even 1932. The first clear indications of Brecht's interest in Marxist theory may be found in his September 1926 notes 'From: On Art and Socialism' (*Brecht on Art and Politics,* p. 35), and in a letter to Helene Weigel in 1927, where he asks her to send him Marxist writings dealing with the history of revolutions. The subsequent development of his Marxism in the Weimar Republic was strongly influenced by encounters with the sociologist Fritz Sternberg and the philosophers Otto Neurath and Karl Korsch. However, whereas Neurath's Marxism is relatively orthodox and grounded in a behaviourist approach to social theory, Korsch was one of the leading critics of orthodox Marxism. Crucially, Korsch took ideas and ideology to be socially real, advocated the need for intellectual struggle and stressed the centrality of dialectic and revolutionary praxis in Marxist theory rather than materialism. The inconsistencies between the theoretical views of Korsch and Neurath are reflected in tensions and contradictions in Brecht's

own position, which have posed major problems for critics seeking to establish an authentic, coherent and consistent Brechtian perspective on aesthetic and sociological issues at this time. The disjunction between the rapid development of Brecht's views on Marxist theory and epic theatre and his output as a playwright, as he simultaneously revises earlier works and devises new ones, makes it difficult to establish a straightforward relationship between his theory and practice of epic theatre in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The 'finalized' versions of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera* in particular are best seen as complex and contradictory overlays of old and new positions and attitudes, rather than specifically Marxist works.

Brecht's writings on theatre from the mid-1920s display four main areas of concern, reflecting his theatrical work with Piscator – as well as his concern to define himself against Piscator (see *Brecht on Art and Politics,* pp. 64–8) – and his intellectual collaboration with Sternberg. First, Brecht constantly attacks the dominant institution of the theatre, which he wishes to see replaced by a more experimental and politicized form of theatre ('Shouldn't We Liquidate Aesthetics?'). In the mid-1920s, this type of theatre was best exemplified by Piscator's radical and influential productions, which attempted to bring together an explicitly Marxist critique of politics and society with a revolution in theatrical representation that incorporated modern technology and film. Second, Brecht advocates a radical shift in the role and response of the audience. He wanted to encourage the audience to be much more critical and questioning by adopting the cool, investigative attitude appropriate to the scientific age ('More Good Sport', 'Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties'; see also 'New Dramatic Writing', *Brecht on Art and Politics,* pp. 68–74). Third, he advocates the need for a new kind of writing for the theatre, which will have epic and documentary characteristics ('Shouldn't We Liquidate Aesthetics?'). His argument is based on the assumption, also shared by Piscator, that the collectivizing impact of industrial capitalism, together with the mechanized carnage of the First World War, had rendered meaningless traditional notions of individualist psychology and human integrity that had been embodied in dramatic form since Shakespeare. Fourth, he tends increasingly to present Marxist accounts of cultural and social phenomena, citing Sternberg in order to insist that a strictly sociological approach to art in general and theatre in particular must abandon aesthetic and moral categories such as eternal value and the notion of an unchanging human nature ('Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties').

As Brecht shifts towards the position delineated in the 'Notes to the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*' in 1930, he elaborates on these issues and moves in a more explicitly Marxist direction. His analyses of the institution of theatre and bourgeois ideology pay increasing attention to the economic structures of capitalist society and class struggle ('Dialectical Dramatic Writing'), while his specifications of the new type of dramatic writing the age requires involve more detailed consideration of economic complexes such as the corn exchange and the oil industry ('Latest Stage: Oedipus', 'On Subject-Matter and Form'). He adopts a more pedagogically oriented conception of theatre ('Dialogue on Acting', 'On Subject-Matter and Form', 'Dialectical Dramatic Writing'), which at the same time attributes a more active role to the spectator in making sense of the play ('Dialogue on Acting'). The actors must attract the spectator's attention by making events striking, so that – in anticipation of his later theory of *Verfremdung* – the spectators are confronted by processes which might seem at first sight to be strange and incomprehensible ('Dialectical Dramatic Writing').

'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*'

Brecht's best-known essay on epic theatre, the 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny',* elaborates further on these concerns, emphatically rejecting the illusionism and escapism of bourgeois theatre, and insisting that epic theatre must eradicate all forms of intoxication and intense emotional involvement on the part of the spectator. This is to be achieved in two ways. First, the linear structure of epic theatre will no longer be 'dramatic', sweeping the spectator along from one experience to the next; instead, it will be discontinuous, segmented and interrupted. And second, the action on stage will be multilayered and multifaceted, confronting the spectator with a variety of points of view so as to provoke critical reflection – a procedure elaborated in the discussion of 'Titles and Screens' in the 'Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*'. This process of critical reflection must engage with the nature of humanity, society and the relationship between society and the individual.

Thus far, Brecht's presentation of epic theatre in the 'Notes on *Mahagonny*' would not appear to be particularly Marxist; the Marxist dimension is most evident in his critique of the institutions of bourgeois opera and theatre, his account of the commodification of contemporary

culture and its proletarianization of cultural producers and his insistence that societal being determines consciousness. Nevertheless, Brecht's variant of Marxist cultural theory does not of itself entail the adoption of any particular aesthetic strategy. That is determined primarily by his goal of activating the spectator in such a way that epic theatre can generate ideological critique and intervention, and it is a strategy that frames his notorious tabular distinction between dramatic and epic theatre. However, when viewed in the context of the 'Notes on *Mahagonny*' as a whole, Brecht's interventionist aesthetic is problematic. On the one hand, he asserts that any discussion of the present form of society, even of its least significant elements, would immediately and inevitably entail a threat to its existence. On the other hand, despite the implied ideological instability of bourgeois society, he also suggests that the prevailing media of dissemination are powerful enough to assimilate and neutralize any discussion of society in its present form.

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, Brecht's Marxist critique of contemporary culture and ideology is supplemented by Freudian theory, in particular by Freud's later, more sociologically aware writings. Towards the end of the 'Notes on *Mahagonny*', his explanation of the escapist role played by the illusions purveyed by bourgeois theatre draws explicitly on Freud's account of the social function of art in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. Then, in his comments on human nature in the 'Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*', Brecht synthesizes the insights of Marxian and Freudian materialism. He first quotes Marx's sixth 'Thesis on Feuerbach', according to which the human essence must be construed as 'the ensemble of all societal relations', only to supplement Marx's sociological perspective on human nature in the very next sentence: 'Likewise, human beings – flesh and blood human beings – can only be comprehended via the processes in and through which they are constituted.' Crucially, Brecht observes, only *epic* theatre can come to terms with such processes. This, he maintains, is because epic theatre is the art form appropriate to materialism, a materialism grounded ultimately in human physicality. In other words, the Marxist connotations of Brecht's classic accounts of epic theatre are less straightforward than one might suppose. His insistence on the importance of biophysical processes certainly puts in question the sociological reductionism of Marx's sixth 'Thesis on Feuerbach'. However, Brecht's own sociological and biological determinism would seem to be at odds with the project of critical intervention encapsulated in the revolutionary Marxist observation at the end of the 'Notes to *Mahagonny*': 'Real innovations attack the base'.

Theatrical Practice

The theatrical practices associated with Brecht's plays and his theoretical precepts are delineated and exemplified with increasing clarity from 1927 onwards, starting with the production of the *Mahagonny* 'Songspiel' in Baden-Baden (see Plate 3). Clear guidelines for the theatrical realization of the full-length opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* are contained in the first version of the libretto, completed in late 1927 (see Giles, ed., *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,* pp. 79–101). Instead of the 'full' curtain of the proscenium arch stage, there was to be a white half-curtain no more than 2.5 metres high, in front of which the actors would occasionally perform and on to which would be projected scene titles in red, together with occasional visual images, such as the wanted poster of Begbick et al. and photographs of her and her accomplices. Further projections were to appear on the backdrop and on a projection screen, possibly in the manner of the screens used in the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928 (see Plate 4). The projected material was to include photographs, a map of Mahagonny, crime figures, film footage of typhoons and erotic pictures.

The key figure in the theatrical realization of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* was Caspar Neher, who designed the set and devised the projections for the premieres in Leipzig (March 1930) and Berlin (December 1931). Neher's central role raises key issues concerning the ownership of epic theatre; its collective character, involving a variety of writers and theatre practitioners, is clearly demonstrated in both of these productions. Neher also seems to be primarily responsible for the practical development of 'Brechtian' epic theatre's idiosyncratic visual style, which is quite distinct from that of Piscator, the Weimar Republic's leading Marxist theatre director. Whereas Piscator made extensive use of documentary film clips, together with montages of authentic photographic material and written texts, Neher's images tend to be cartoon-like sketches in the manner of George Grosz. With the Berlin premiere of *The Mother* in January 1932, however, a significant shift occurs. The visual style of this production is much closer to that of the 'Piscator Stage' in 1927–8 (see Plate 11), as is its revolutionary Marxist political stance: it is not surprising that *The Mother* should have been identified by some critics as the classic example of fully-fledged epic theatre.

The self-reflexive dimensions of epic theatre are well exemplified in *The Threepenny Opera.* It demystifies traditional dramatic devices, such as the temporal conventions associated with the neo-classical unities and the deus ex machina of classical tragedy. It foregrounds the theatricality of the songs,

partly through lighting changes and the projection of song titles when songs are sung, and partly because of the visible change in the actor's theatrical function when singing – reinforced by the fact that the singer may sing against the melody, or not even sing at all. Its most provocative piece of self-reflexive theatre is, however, Polly's thematization of epic theatre as a demonstration or replay when she introduces the 'Pirate Jenny' song. This interpolation of epic theatre within epic theatre draws the spectators' attention to the work's debunking of the representational conventions of dramatic theatre and its self-conscious presentation of role play (see 'Tips for Actors'), thereby emphasizing that epic acting involves a distanced display of behavioural attitudes. Similar theatrical devices were also used in the Berlin production of *Man Equals Man* in 1931, though the monstrous soldiers come across as absurdist figures in the tradition of Alfred Jarry, rather than embodying a Marxist perspective (see Plate 6). The production's main provocation, however, involved Peter Lorre's rigorously anti-Naturalistic and anti-empathetic acting style, which Brecht seeks to justify in considerable detail.

Finally, Brecht also suggests that the acting style associated with epic theatre is particularly well exemplified in two performances by Helene Weigel, as Jocasta's maid in *Oedipus* (see 'Dialogue on Acting') and Pelagea Vlassova in *The Mother,* both of which aim to systematically avoid transference of the actor's emotional dispositions to the spectators. When Weigel reports the death of her mistress in *Oedipus,* her acting deviates from the norm in that her voice lacks emotion or pain, and her gestures are mechanical. Her horror is conveyed not by her voice but by her face, its white make-up visually signifying the emotional impact of Jocasta's death. Weigel sought to encourage the spectators to respond intellectually and morally to Jocasta's suicide and achieved this partly by highlighting her own astonishment at what she had witnessed. In section 5 of the 'Notes' to Brecht's production of *The Mother* in 1932, Weigel's anti-empathetic and non-identificatory acting style is highlighted once more, notably in the opening scene. Brecht observes that Weigel had delivered her lines as if they were written in the third person – rather than the first – so as to show the spectators that she was not pretending to be the real-life person Pelagea Vlassova in a real room, in real time, in the real world. By so doing, Weigel immediately broke the spell of illusionist theatre, thereby preventing the spectators from suspending their disbelief and enabling them to become properly critical agents.

Steve Giles

Frank Wedekind

Last Saturday, swarming down the Lech under a star-dusted sky, we happened to be singing his songs to guitar – the one to Franziska, the one about the blind boy, a dance tune. And then, when it had got very late and we were sitting by the dam with our shoes almost in the water, the song about the vagaries of fortune and how strange they are – the one which advises us to do a somersault every day. On Sunday morning we were shocked to read that Frank Wedekind had died the previous day.

It is hard to believe it. His vitality was his finest feature. He had only to enter a lecture-hall full of hundreds of noisy students, or a room, or a stage, with that singular posture of his, his chiselled brass skull slightly ducked and thrust forward, a little unwieldy and oppressive, and everyone would fall silent. Although he was not particularly good at acting (he would regularly forget even the limp he himself had prescribed, and he couldn't remember his lines), as the Marquis von Keith he put many professional actors in the shade. He filled every corner of a room with his personality. There he would stand, ugly, brutal, dangerous, with his close-cropped red hair and his hands in his trouser pockets, and you got the feeling that the devil himself couldn't have shifted him. He stepped out before the curtain as the ringmaster in a red tailcoat, with a whip and a revolver clenched in his fists, and no-one who had heard it could ever forget that hard, dry, metallic voice, that brazen faun's head with those 'melancholy owl's eyes' set in immobile features. A few weeks ago at the Bonbonnière he sang his songs to guitar accompaniment in a brittle voice, slightly monotonous and quite untrained. No singer ever gave me such a shock, such a thrill. This man's intense aliveness and energy allowed him – even when he found himself the object of laughter and scorn – to proclaim his brazen hymn to humanity, and also gave him that personal magic of his. He seemed indestructible.

In the autumn, when a small group of us heard him read from *Heracles,* his last work, I was amazed at his brazen energy. For two and a half hours without stopping, without once lowering his voice (and what a strong, brazen voice it was), barely pausing for breath for even a moment between acts, bent motionless over the table, he read – half from memory – those verses wrought in brass, looking deep into the eyes of each of his listeners in turn.

The last time I saw and heard him was six weeks ago at the farewell party given by the members of Kutscher's seminar. He seemed in the best

of health, spoke animatedly and, well past midnight, with us cheering him on, he sang three of his finest songs to the lute. Without actually seeing him buried[,] I cannot comprehend that he is dead. Along with Tolstoy and Strindberg, he was one of the great educators of modern Europe. His greatest work was his own personality.

[*'Frank Wedekind'*, BFA 21/35-6]

First published in *Augsburger Neueste Nachrichten,* 12 March 1918. Wedekind had died on the afternoon of 9 March 1918. Then aged just 20, Brecht was studying medicine and philosophy at Munich University, where he attended the theatre seminar conducted by Professor Artur Kutscher (1878–1960), Wedekind's friend and biographer. The songs referred to in the opening paragraph are presumably 'Franziska's Evening Song', 'The Blind Boy', 'Young Blood' (published in Wedekind's *Four Seasons* poetry collection) and 'Bajazzo'. *Der Marquis von Keith* is one of Wedekind's best-known plays, and Brecht also refers to the ringmaster in *Earth Spirit,* the first of the 'Lulu' plays.

Me in the Theatre

I am a predator and behave in the theatre just as I would in the jungle. I need to destroy things – I am not used to eating plants. That is why the scent of fresh meat has often hung over the grass, and why the souls of my heroes were very colourful landscapes with stark contours and heavy atmospheres. The stampede of fighters tearing each other to pieces calms me – their loud oaths satiate me, and the small, angry cries of the damned bring me relief. The sound of great explosions thrills me like music; the irrevocable and incomparable gesture satisfies my ambition and at the same time quells my urge to laugh. And the best thing about my victims is that deep, endless grunting that rolls, full and heavy, out of the jungle, keeping the strong souls in a perpetual state of trembling.

[*'Ich im Theater'*, BFA 21/53]

Written in early 1920.

Theatre as Sport

The cinema is for those poor devils who want to satisfy their hunger for action and romance quickly, in passing: three suicides for eighty cents, wrapped up in lessons about how to behave in polite company, with organ music and pretty landscapes thrown in for good measure – the cinema is a canteen, a vending machine, a shelter for the spiritually homeless, while the theatre is for those with subtler tastes. Treating a visit to the theatre as if you were going to church or to court or to school is the wrong way to go about it. Going to the theatre should be like attending a sporting event – not to watch wrestlers flexing their biceps but to witness subtler contests, ones fought with words. There are always at least two people on the stage, and they are usually engaged in some kind of struggle. You have to watch closely to see who wins. A pastor and a widow stand on stage together, in the gloom of an old room filled with plants. The pastor cries, 'You should not have let your son go to Paris. It has been the ruin of him. You are a guilty woman!' The woman is silent. So the pastor has the upper hand. He makes a formidable speech before God. The woman also, he says, ran away from her son's dead father. She wants to raise a memorial to her husband now, out of remorse, but it is too late. All this we learn from the pastor, who has the upper hand. Then the woman speaks. She says, 'The man was a philanderer. He used to grope the servant girls, right there in the conservatory. That's why I sent my son away – to prevent the child being corrupted. And I am building the memorial so that he might honour his father – who was a drunkard, Pastor.' So that's how it was? The woman has won. It was an interesting wrestling match. There was no knowing who was going to win. (The play is called *Ghosts*: it's a must-see.) The woman in the play has enemies she must fight until she can fight no more, the people who want to pry into her misery. And misery must remain hidden, mustn't it? Which requires one to lie, continually . . . how will it end? Will it turn out well? The outcome is this: by the end of that day, everything has been revealed, and the widow emerges as a strong and a heroic woman. It is all over for her, however. There are conversations in the play that are like fleeing across slate roofs on a dark night. There is always a risk of falling, ending up lying in an alleyway with shattered limbs. You see people on the stage who talk like books, full of ideals. But it soon becomes clear that this is just idle talk, and unsavoury little predators are peddling it. Some are rich people like Everyman, but when the end comes and the death knell tolls, he

is like a small, whimpering dog. You see all this in the theatre and you hear it too. You can see inside people, if you look closely enough – just like in a wrestling match, what's interesting are the small, subtle tricks. You don't find that kind of thing in the cinema, which is more suited to stupid people who cannot understand that which is implicit or difficult. That's why those with more intelligence and subtlety need to go to the theatre, but they must treat it, as I have said, as if they were watching sport.

[*'Das Theater als Sport',* BFA 21/56-8]

Written in 1920. The plays Brecht refers to are Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Everyman.*

A Reckoning

For a man who wants to criticize our municipal theatre – which he cannot help doing if he has had to spend an entire season attending performances and writing about them, and has taken his job seriously at least for the time that he has been writing – the main difficulty will be that there can be no question of revealing any kind of secret. He cannot point a stubby finger at what is going on in the theatre and say, 'You people have always thought this amounted to something, but I tell you this: it's nothing short of a scandal. What you see before you is your own absolute bankruptcy; it's your own stupidity, your mental laziness and your degeneracy that are being publicly exposed.' No, there's no point in him saying that because it comes as no surprise to you. You've known it all along; there's nothing anyone can do about it. It's bad, yes, but to say it's as bad as all that is just exaggeration, pomposity, sensationalism. Liberalism bears you out. Live and let live, that's your motto; when read another way – in the light of moral judgement, for example – it urges: go to pieces and let things go to pieces; keep your mouth shut and keep the peace, the royal Bavarian peace of blessed memory. Tell the more intelligent playgoers, though, that their plays have to be improved – that it's unwatchable – and they calmly reply: 'Oh well, it's good enough for Augsburg.' Considering themselves, naturally, to be exceptions. But let me tell you, dear readers: it is perfectly possible to fill a theatre with the exceptions. Because their numbers would be swelled by all the other people who would like to be exceptions too. Of course, the theatre manager can always shrug sorrowfully and say, 'But nobody comes

to see plays. The theatre's always half empty. I can't be expected to spend money under those conditions.' And the thought never seems to occur to anyone that the theatre might be half empty precisely because he doesn't spend any money on plays. If drama here were better, if it had as much publicity as the opera, if a dramatic tradition could be created to rival that of the opera, if it were possible to cultivate a core group of playgoers – perhaps by way of subscriptions – then more people would go to see plays and they would generate more money. But at present a huge amount of money is lavished on the opera in comparison to the drama; expensive guest singers are hired for the opera in order to draw in the snobs, and the latest fashionable works are put on, while the drama is denied the slightest new acquisition. On top of this, the actors are all very young and leading roles are given to a mediocrity who is not too bad as Valentin but unwatchable as Faust. Some of these young people have considerable talent, but that talent will be spoilt if they are required to carry the weight of whole productions on their shoulders. An actor – a very talented actor – lands a notoriously difficult part like Don Carlos and is forced by lack of rehearsal and by the constant demands placed upon him to give a stereotypical performance throughout large sections of the play. A promising actress given central roles in major plays too soon finds herself, as Elisabeth or Magdalena, relying on superficialities to make up for her lack of experience; the best she can possibly learn from this is the art of getting out of a jam. This too is ruthless exploitation. The director, who is capable and hardworking and also happens to be possessed of literary ambition – a great rarity! – works painstakingly to lift the performances of beginners and old hands alike to a more or less tolerable standard, against a backdrop of ridiculous scenery and props on which, it is clear to everyone, the bare minimum has been spent; and he does this for the benefit of an utterly uneducated audience in the orchestra seats. He himself is an intelligent actor of some calibre, but he is not a draw, neither for the masses nor the exceptions.

After a whole season of working conscientiously – and not without talent and idealism – at this kind of theatre, you are forced to wonder whether the old system of inviting guest companies for small intimate performances was not preferable. You will tell me this is going too far, but all things considered there may be something in it; it may even explain why we don't seem to have much use for the drama. After all, it's fair to say that only the opera does well in Augsburg; even a good play doesn't fill theatres. Some might counter this by saying the masses simply flock to whatever makes the most noise (though we could also make a lot of noise for and within drama).