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Brecht

Collected Plays: Eight

The Antigone of Sophocles

The Days of the Commune

Turandot or The Whitewashers' Congress

Edited and introduced by

Tom Kuhn and David Constantine

B L O O M S B U R Y

Bertolt Brecht

Collected Plays: Eight

The Antigone of Sophocles, The Days of the Commune,
Turandot or The Whitewashers' Congress

Volume Eight of Brecht's *Collected Plays* contains his last completed plays, from the eight years between his return from America to Europe after the war and his death in 1956. Brecht devoted his energies at this time to the establishment of a new, post-fascist literature and theatre. He founded the Berliner Ensemble with his wife, Helene Weigel, and created models of production practice for future generations.

Brecht's *Antigone* (1948) is a bold adaptation of Hölderlin's classic German translation of Sophocles' play. A reflection on resistance and dictatorship in the aftermath of Nazism, it was also a radical new experiment in epic theatre. The play was first staged in Switzerland, in collaboration with associates from the pre-Nazi years and the production formed the basis for Brecht's first *Model-Book*.

The Days of the Commune, a semi-documentary account of the Paris Commune of 1871, was originally planned to be the first production by the new Berliner Ensemble in 1949. Partly for political reasons, it was not in fact premièred until after Brecht's death. His most serious and ambitious historical play, it sticks closely to the historical sources; ideologically, it is an exercise in thinking beyond defeat.

In *Turandot or the Whitewashers' Congress*, Brecht returned to a long-running plan to write a grand satire of the bourgeois intellectual class. He developed a bizarre comic variation on the old Turandot story, dressed up as a farcical review of the flailing left-wing intelligentsia of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi bureaucracy, the ineffectual anti-fascist exiles, and the calcified civil service of the young GDR. It was his last completed play.

The plays are accompanied by an introduction and notes by Tom Kuhn and David Constantine, including variants and relevant texts by Brecht.

Bertolt Brecht was born in Augsburg on 10 February 1898 and died in Berlin on 14 August 1956. He grew to maturity as a playwright in the frenetic years of the twenties and early thirties, with such plays as *Man equals Man*, *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Mother*. He left Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933, eventually reaching the United States in 1941, where he remained until 1947. It was during this period of exile that such masterpieces as *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* were written. Shortly after his return to Europe in 1947 he founded the Berliner Ensemble, and from then until his death was mainly occupied in producing his own plays.

Other Bertolt Brecht publications by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

Brecht Collected Plays: One

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Brecht Collected Plays: Two

(Man Equals Man, The Elephant Calf, The Threepenny Opera, The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, The Seven Deadly Sins)

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(The Visions of Simone Machard, Schweyk in the Second World War, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Duchess of Malfi)

Brecht Collected Plays: Eight

(The Days of the Commune, The Antigone of Sophocles, Turandot or the Whitewashers' Congress)

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Bertolt Brecht

Collected Plays: Eight

The Antigone of Sophocles
translated by David Constantine

Original work entitled:
Die Antigone des Sophokles

The Days of the Commune
translated by David Constantine

Original work entitled:
Die Tage der Kommune

Turandot or The Whitewashers' Congress
translated by Tom Kuhn
Original work entitled:
Turandot oder Der Kongreß der Weißwäscher

Edited and introduced by Tom Kuhn
and David Constantine

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published in Great Britain in hardback in 2003 by Methuen Publishing Limited
First published in paperback in 2004

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ISBN PB: 978-0-4137-7352-4
ePub: 978-1-4725-3856-7
ePDF: 978-1-4725-3857-4

This volume, the last in the series of Brecht's Collected Plays, is dedicated to the memory of John Willett, who initiated this edition and did more than any other to bring Brecht to the English language.

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Introduction

THE LAST PLAYS, 1948-56

The three plays in this volume date from the last years of Brecht's life, when he returned from the United States and tried to establish a career in Europe once again. He had had six somewhat frustrating years in America, in which he had failed to make much impact where it might have mattered most to him – in Hollywood and on Broadway – and he had already started to plan his return by the end of 1946. His summons in the following year to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (investigating 'Communist infiltration of the motion picture industry') can only have served to convince him that there was no future for him there. The day after testifying, on 31 October 1947, Brecht boarded a flight to Paris. A few days later he was on his way to Zurich, where he was hoping to stage *Mr Puntila and his Man Matti* at the Zurich Schauspielhaus (a theatre which had played an extraordinary role in keeping an oppositional German theatre alive during the Nazi years). 'The old continent is shabby and impoverished,' he wrote to Ruth Berlau, 'but I think you'll like it, as I do. We'll be able to work' (*Letters*, p.440). Europe was clearing up after the war, and the competition between the Western powers and the Soviet Union for political influence over central Europe was in full swing. Germany was divided into four separately administered zones, its people exhausted and mistrustful – if also cautiously inquisitive for the European and American culture which they had been denied over the past dozen years. Brecht himself was stateless, a suspect subversive, but without much else of a reputation. Next to nothing of his writings since 1938 was published, and nothing was in print. There was a serious paper shortage. Many of the theatre buildings were in ruins. It was not going to be easy.

It is sometimes maintained that these last nine years of Brecht's life were comparatively unfruitful, and it's true, he wrote less than in the apparently far more difficult circumstances of exile in Scandinavia and the United States. On the other hand, whereas the plays he wrote for European and American exile were designed to be accessible to

bourgeois audiences internationally, and have duly become popular theatrical hits, the three major plays of Brecht's post-war years are, in their different ways, more uncompromising and more challenging works. *The Antigone of Sophocles* was conceived as a new experiment in the epic theatre, and is linguistically an extraordinary composition. *The Days of the Commune* is Brecht's only real excursion in historical drama, an attempt to write an adequate Marxist account of a key moment in revolutionary history, and a huge play. And *Turandot or The Whitewashers' Congress* is part of a grand satire of the bourgeois intelligentsia which engaged him intermittently for over twenty years. All three were important works for Brecht.

In other ways too, the years 1948 to 1956 were productive. Brecht had to establish a position in a German-speaking cultural context, in the institutions of the theatre, with the audiences and critics, and, in due course, with the cultural and political bureaucracies of the Soviet sector and subsequently the GDR (founded in 1949). Besides, one of his pre-eminent concerns was to consolidate his considerable achievements of the previous decades. He was extremely active in organising and promoting productions of his plays, visiting and corresponding with theatres all over Europe, offering opinions and advice. He prepared texts for publication, or re-publication, continuing the *Versuche (Experiments)* series of the pre-1933 years, and subsequently initiating a Collected Works edition. And he wrote new texts: poems (including the *Buckow Elegies*), prose sketches, political and cultural commentaries, and the all-important synthesis of his theoretical ideas in the *Short Organum for the Theatre*, his 'description of a theatre for the scientific age'. Perhaps most importantly, in terms of Brecht's subsequent reputation in the European theatre, he and Helene Weigel founded a theatre company, devoted to promoting Brecht's own works, method and theatrical style, and schooling a whole new generation of directors and actors. Given the state of German theatre and cultural life after National Socialism, that entailed the rediscovery of a repertoire and a whole new justification of the social role of the theatre. It was no small undertaking.

In their different ways the three plays presented here were all conceived as contributions to that larger task: not just efforts to re-launch Brecht's career, but investigations into the appropriate culture for a post-war, post-Fascist Europe.

Interestingly, given the debates at the time about the value of the cultural heritage, they all take some existing literary text as a basis or model. *Turandot* obviously has its roots in earlier versions of that story, even if it has become something rather different in Brecht's

hands; one might say that, in this case, the existing fable was a peg on which to hang a brand new drama with quite new concerns. *The Days of the Commune* is a more purposeful counter-design, provoked (as much as inspired) by Nordahl Grieg's play about the Paris Commune, *Defeat*. Only the first of the three, *Antigone*, is akin to what one might normally understand as a conscientious literary adaptation. Brecht's dramatic output is full of adaptations of some sort or another, derived from a startlingly wide range of sources. One of his enduring preoccupations was with the culture of the past, and the uses to which it could, and should, be put. It is a matter which becomes particularly urgent in these last years, partly as a consequence of that mission to rediscover the repertoire and to create a cultural tradition for a Germany after Nazism.

As editors, we have sought to maintain a distinction: between, on the one hand, plays, such as those of this volume, which were independent literary projects, initiated and undertaken by Brecht (abetted by the customary collaborators), and, on the other hand, the stage adaptations of the Berliner Ensemble, which are clear examples of teamwork by the directors and dramaturgs of the Ensemble, and in which Brecht's own contribution, although he was the team-leader, may sometimes have been quite small. The Ensemble's engagement with the repertoire, in critical dialogue with the culture of the past, is a separate, important strand in Brecht's late work in the theatre.¹

* * *

Arrived in Zurich, Brecht's first real contact was with Caspar Neher, the old schoolfriend who had designed the sets for many of his most successful pre-1933 productions and who had stayed in Germany. Together (and with the Austrian composer Gottfried von Einem, and the dramaturg of the Schauspielhaus Kurt Hirschfeld, amongst others), they hatched a whole range of plans and re-established contact with an array of friends and colleagues in the theatre world. The letters and diaries of these first months back in Europe are bursting with names.

Amongst their initial schemes in 1947/48 were the translation back into German of the new version of *Galileo*, the productions of *Puntilla* in Zurich and of *Mother Courage* in Berlin a year later, as

¹ Some of the most important of the Berliner Ensemble adaptations, all given out as the work of their original authors and not published in Brecht's lifetime as 'his', have been published separately in English: J.M.R. Lenz's *The Tutor*, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Anna Seghers's *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, Molière's *Don Juan*, and George Farquhar's *Trumpets and Drums*.

well as various translations and productions in non-German-speaking countries. But the very first project came about rather more unexpectedly. In November 1947 Brecht chanced to meet Hans Curjel, a Berlin theatre director whom he had got to know in 1929, working on *Mahagonny*. Curjel immediately mooted the possibility of a new venture at the theatre in Chur, of which he was now director. Within a few weeks, Brecht and Neher had mapped out an adaptation of Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* and visited the old cinema in Chur which served as a theatre. In several ways, this must have seemed a return to the circumstances prior to 1933. It was to be Brecht's first job as a director back in the professional German-speaking theatre, it marked the beginning of renewed collaboration with Neher (who did the costumes, stage set and more) and, perhaps most enticingly, it was to be Helene Weigel's first real speaking part in ten years. Brecht was excited to be working in German again; the fact that this was a text which strained the language to its utmost merely added to the pleasure and the sense of importance (evidenced in the *Journal* entries quoted in the Notes). But the other great attraction was to be able to work experimentally again with his theories of epic and of *Verfremdung*. This is a play which employs a chorus and masks, and a decisive amount of reported action. So it is significant that the practical work on the *Antigone* adaptation coincided with Brecht's preparation of the summary of his theatre-theoretical ideas which became the *Short Organum*. One must imagine him working simultaneously on these projects.

After some postponements, the première of *The Antigone of Sophocles* came eventually on 15 February 1948. The attendance of friends and guests from Zurich and elsewhere ensured that Brecht's return to German-language theatre enjoyed some resonance. All the same, it was not a great success. The production has retrospectively achieved a particular reputation by virtue of the painstaking documentation in text and photographs of the *Antigone-Model* (see pp.203-15), but at the time it saw only five performances, one a matinée in Zurich. Contemporary reviews praised the Prelude, set in Berlin in April 1945, for its compelling updating of the myth, and it was recognised that the epic presentation – the actors showing, rather than impersonating their roles – marked this out as a significant theatrical event. Nonetheless, the critics struggled with the text and with Brecht's efforts to manoeuvre the story away from its familiar moral battleground (of individual conscience and the demands of the state). The publication a few months later of the *Antigone-Model*, including the complete play-text, was even more disappointing; only

some five hundred copies were sold initially. There was to be just one further full production of the play in Brecht's lifetime, in the small German town of Greiz in November 1951. This was understood as an opportunity to test out the model. Although the conclusions were again generally favourable, it was still a minor event in a decidedly modest theatre. The experience of *Antigone* may have been a crucial test for the participants, but it would take more than this to re-establish Brecht's position. For the time being, he returned to the *Short Organum* and to *Puntila*, which had its opening night on 15 June 1948. *Puntila* was the fourth of his Scandinavian plays to have its première in Zurich, but it was the first which Brecht was to direct himself.

Brecht's adaptation remains a fascinating chapter in the life of the Antigone story: a paradoxical attempt to rationalise and update the story according to Brecht's own social philosophy (with none of the psychological baggage of other modern treatments of classical myth), while at the same time apparently allowing the extraordinary dramatic and poetic language of his predecessors (both Sophocles and Hölderlin) to derail his own project. It seems evident that his interest in the material was increasingly linguistic and theatrical, rather than moral or political. Besides, Brecht's literary adaptations are seldom wholesale appropriations, designed to obliterate the original. Instead they seek, self-consciously, to allow the history of a text to show through, in order to imply the possibility of a future evolution too. For Greiz, Brecht deleted the 'Berlin 1945' Prelude, with its powerful yet ambiguous invocation of anti-Fascist resistance, and replaced it with a speech (see 'New Prologue', p.218) which simply enjoins the audience to

Search in your own hearts and minds for similar deeds
In the recent past or for the absence
Of any such deeds.

So it may be quite appropriate that, in the 1960s, critics of this deliberately and transparently adapted play heard and saw hints of contemporary events in Vietnam, Pakistan and India. The epic method is meant to encourage just such an open, re-evaluative approach. Despite its difficulty, Brecht's *Antigone* remains an intriguing text and a provocative play, whose day is not done as long as there are wars and the moral and social conflicts they entail.

* * *

In the meantime, there were plans afoot to bring Brecht back to Berlin, led by Herbert Ihering, the critic who had championed him in

the 1920s and who had remained in Germany. Brecht himself hoped to be able to return to the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, where he had worked in the last years of the Weimar Republic. Early in 1948 Wolfgang Langhoff staged a successful production of *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* at the Deutsches Theater, and then offered that theatre for Brecht's and Erich Engel's own production of *Mother Courage*. Later in the year there were productions of *Puntilla* in Hamburg and of *Mother Courage* in Vienna. But Brecht himself was still in Zurich, waiting for his papers to come through. Contemplating the risk of future travel restrictions, he discussed with Neher and von Einem the possibility of working as house playwright at the Salzburg Festival, of which von Einem was a director, and of acquiring Austrian citizenship.

Eventually, Brecht and Weigel made a first visit to Berlin, in October 1948. Thanks to the efforts of Ihering, Langhoff and others, and with the support of the Communist Kulturbund and senior figures in the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (Wilhelm Pieck, soon to be the first President of the GDR, and Otto Grotewohl, the equivalent of Prime Minister), they were given an official welcoming reception. But negotiations and discussions about a company, and about the availability of a suitable theatre, remained mired in nervous uncertainty. Then, quite suddenly, the success of *Mother Courage* in Berlin in January 1949 lent momentum to the matter. The couple were offered what was in the circumstances an extraordinary opportunity: to set up their own ensemble. They moved quickly. In February 1949 the constitution of the Berliner Ensemble was agreed, and by April its funding was approved. Weigel became its able and strong-willed intendant (and was to give defining performances as Courage and Pelegea Vlassova in *The Mother*); Brecht was its artistic director and, in the first years, the director, or co-director with Engel, of its most famous productions; Dessau and Eisler were its composers; and Neher was for years its exemplary designer. From now on, the composition of this Ensemble and its repertoire became Brecht's overriding concerns.

This was the context of *The Days of the Commune*. Brecht had returned to Zurich alone in late February, in order to recruit actors and other theatre professionals, to collect his daughter, and to settle his affairs there (including setting up a Swiss bank account, just in case). It was presumably the new Ensemble's commitment to a 'progressive' programme that induced him, despite his reservations about the author's political insight, to look once more at Nordahl Grieg's play, *Defeat* (see Editorial Notes). The appraisal of the Paris Commune by Marx and Engels (and subsequently Lenin) had

established the Commune as the first 'proletarian revolution' and the earliest example of a 'Soviet'-style social organisation by democratic council. It must have seemed ideal material for the new company's opening production. If it didn't work out, the other play Brecht was considering was Büchner's French Revolutionary drama, *Danton's Death*. In Zurich Ruth Berlau joined him and, with Caspar Neher, they worked together on the evidently recalcitrant material, resolving soon to depart quite decisively from Grieg's play. By the end of April 1949 the manuscript of the new play was finished. But it had been a rush-job and it is clear that Brecht still had his misgivings. He resolved to launch the Ensemble with the far less controversial *Puntila*, and *The Days of the Commune* was scheduled instead as the third production (after *Puntila* and Maxim Gorki's *Vassa Shelesnova*). In December he decided to postpone it still further, in favour of a new adaptation of J.M.R. Lenz's *The Tutor* – 'because the Volksbühne with about 60,000 members, which makes up the bulk of our audience, has only about 0.3% workers' (*Journals*, p.425). Preliminary preparations for a production continued, but other new projects kept intervening. It was not in fact until 17 November 1956, three months after Brecht's death, that *The Days of the Commune* had its première, in Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz), under the joint direction of two of Brecht's young protégés, Benno Besson and Manfred Wekwerth.

In his interpretation of the Paris Commune Brecht adhered closely to the 'classical' line established by Marx and represented in Brecht's most important historical source-book, Hermann Duncker's edited collection of documents and other material, *Pariser Kommune 1871* (Berlin, 1931): that the outcome of the siege of Paris after the Franco-Prussian War could only have been different if the ruling class had been prepared to align themselves behind the National Guard, but that the French bourgeoisie were terrified at the thought of an armed labour force, and so initiated the betrayal of the French people by its government and the capitulation of Paris. He defended his account in November 1949 in a letter to Eric Russell Bentley, his American translator and an early champion of the Brechtian theatre:

It's probably true that the play cannot be accepted unless one accepts the Marxist point of view. But to take a classical example: To accept *Hamlet* or *Troilus and Cressida* mustn't one accept the attitudes of Montaigne or Bacon? [. . .] What the play can show is only that the proletariat cannot counter the force of its adversaries unless it is prepared to use force. I've made no attempt to bring out parallels between Paris in 1871 and Berlin in

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1949, not even where they might have greatly simplified the play. (*Letters*, p.482)

Some of the possible objections to the play are anticipated, even before it had been published or produced. But the debate is clearly not just about the interpretation of distant historical events. The reference to Berlin in 1949 is to a tense political situation. In response to economic reform in the West and the perceived threat of a strong new currency, the USSR had severed land communications to the Western sectors of the city, leading to the blockade. As Brecht saw it, the new Communist regime was seeking to protect itself against the capitalist West, rather as the Paris Commune had erected the barricades against the bourgeois government and its new Prussian friends. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the play seemed too party-political for commentators in the West. Correspondingly, for the Communist world it was insufficiently politically resolute: an internal report for the Central Committee condemned Brecht's new piece as a depressing account of a failed revolution.

The première seven years later (with Neher's stage set and Eisler's music) met with considerable interest, partly because it was the first production of a Brecht play after his death. But the critics were still uncertain what to make of it. They were divided in their assessments of its historical value and of possible contemporary analogies (now to the uprising in Hungary), they wondered if Brecht had abandoned *Verfremdung* in favour of Socialist Realism, and Alfred Kurella opined that it was one of Brecht's weakest works, for it spoke to neither heart nor head. The atmosphere of the Cold War invaded the responses in the West: this was a celebration of terror, an incitement to political murder, and so on. Arthur Adamov riposted with his own Commune-play *Le Printemps 71* (1960), an effort to set the record straight in both historical and artistic terms. A second Berliner Ensemble production, in 1962, of a radically revised version by Wekwerth and Tenschert, was evidently conceived to imply an analogy between the Paris barricades and the erection of the Berlin Wall (in August 1961). It was quietly but positively received in the East; in the West the perfection of the staging was admired, while the political implications (that such brutal measures might be necessary) were deplored. Since then *The Days of the Commune* has been one of the least performed of Brecht's plays, and at the same time one of the most contentious. Its reception in the theatre has been, more than of any other play, entangled in the changing political contexts: a first West German production soon after the 1968 unrest, a Frankfurt production at the time of the RAF terrorist attacks, and so on. The

Commune has been made to serve as a symbol both of the endangered Communist revolution and of anti-Communist revolt. Directors and critics have repeatedly exploited the claim that the play is supposedly unfinished.

The accusations sometimes levelled at the play, of a crude realism, historical naivety and, worse, of political propagandism and Stalinism, are misplaced. Brecht may insist on violence for the preservation of the good cause, but his determined move back to Marx's own critique of the Commune implies very much a revolutionary history carried on the back of the working masses, and not a Leninist Party, let alone a Stalinist one. Brecht creates a class of representative individuals, and above all a family (Madame Cabet and her circle), as both objects and potentially powerful subjects of history. And the play employs familiar Brechtian strategies: relatively self-contained 'gestic' scenes, moments of *Verfremdung* and 'play-within-play'. In one particular way, however, the technique does perhaps represent an interesting variation. Although Grieg's play is obviously an important point of departure, *The Days of the Commune* also proceeds – in an exceptionally documentary manner for Brecht (see Editorial Notes) – from the stuff of history (and from that one canonical interpretation, by Marx). So, whereas he is elsewhere inclined to confront the fables and the fictions with social and historical reality (and it is out of that that a critical, *verfremdet* reception is derived), here the contradictions have to be discovered between the historical facts themselves and the historical truth (in Brecht's sense of a 'useful' insight) – between the real mistakes of the Commune and the interpretations of those mistakes, in their turn historically determined.

In his work on the *Antigone-Model* Brecht had suggested that the choice of material depended on its capacity both to set interesting formal problems and to achieve a certain contemporary resonance. Writing later about *Coriolanus* he argued that the discovery of new and 'relevant' readings was part of 'the fun of dealing with a slice of illuminated history' (*Brecht on Theatre*, p.265). Klaus Detlef Müller has argued that *The Days of the Commune* is just such a slice.¹ The dialectical negotiations between the historical material and its changing relevance in different historical periods and contexts are a key to a continuing engagement with Brecht's drama. Rather like the

¹ In the *Brecht-Handbuch*, edited by Jan Knopf, vol.1 (Stuttgart/Weimar, 2001), p.557. This is a valuable reference work, which we have used alongside the standard, commented German edition of Brecht's works, the *Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (abbreviated as BFA).

process of transparent adaptation (in *Antigone*) which invites the continual re-evaluation of a text, so the process here is conceived to reveal what we might call 'the history of a history': from Marx (whom Brecht treats as a base), through Lenin, to the divided Germany of 1949. It is a small step to develop this trajectory beyond Brecht's own lifetime: to the uprisings of 1956, the crisis of 1961/62, the eruptions of the later 1960s, and after. Although the vision of a proletarian state may have faded in our own time, it is still possible to see in Brecht's play shadows of more recent political phenomena, such as the collapse of the very Communist state for which it was originally conceived, or the corruption of social democracy by global capitalism. Above all, *The Days of the Commune* is a conscientious exercise in thinking beyond defeat.

* * *

So, in November 1949, the Berliner Ensemble began its career not with a new play, but with the Brecht-Engel production of *Puntila*, once more with Leonard Steckel (a former Piscator actor from Zurich) as Puntila, and now with music by Dessau and sets by Neher. The early history of the remarkable institution of the Berliner Ensemble – a state company of the GDR under the auspices of the Ministry of Education – belongs elsewhere: its array of old talents from the Left theatre of the Weimar Republic, the exceptional performers and directors of the younger generation who were trained here, the controversies over programmes, the adaptations and excursions into old and new repertoires, its move back into the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre, its struggles at home and its triumphant tours to Paris and London. The outline is given in the *Letters* volume (pp.431–39), and the political context and Brecht's response discussed in more detail in *Brecht on Art and Politics* (pp.273–81).

For Brecht's own last play we turn away, in the first instance, from the broader history of this literary field, and even from the 1950s. For the first mention of the title *Turandot* is in a notebook of 1922/23, in a list of literary works and figures that had attracted Brecht's interest. As far as we know, he only came back to the story in the 1930s. Drafts and sketches from the next twenty years are reviewed briefly in the Editorial Notes.

There are a handful of projects like this, that occupied Brecht's energies intermittently over a very long period. His first play *Baal* was revisited in three subsequent decades; the first sketches for what was to become, in the 1940s, *The Good Person of Szechwan* date from the mid-1920s; and *Life of Galileo* went through three very different versions over the course of nearly twenty years. In each

case, these were concepts which were allowed to evolve, to shed old concerns and to accrue new ones, as the context of writing and reception moved on. In each case, the later versions are supported as though on a layered skein of allusions and points of reference. The concerns of the older drafts are still visible through the later texts. Rather as *Antigone* and *The Days of the Commune*, by their very structure, encourage re-evaluations, here the texts themselves are changeable, for a changeable world. Contradictions are allowed, even encouraged, to survive the process. So *Turandot* or *The White-washers' Congress* manages to be 'about' the role of the intellectual in the Weimar Republic, and in Nazi Germany, and in the GDR. It is vain to search for a single integrated reading which can easily embrace all its terms of reference. All sorts of allusions, again to over twenty years of contemporary history, are allowed to rub up, one against the other.

In *Turandot*, all this is made easier by the extremely free treatment of the traditional Turandot story, and by the use of an obviously *verfremdet*, almost fairy-tale setting. Brecht's China only very occasionally stands in for the real contemporary China (where Kai Ho takes his bow as Mao Tse-tung). More often it is the poetic fiction of 'Chima', as Brecht sometimes called it: a simplified model of social, economic and political structures, part feudal, part monopoly-capitalist, into which he attempts to interleave a bit of Chinese and a lot of European history. In the 1930s Brecht specifically noted that the costumes for this play should be half European and half Chinese.

The genesis (or perhaps better: evolution) of the play is further complicated by its relation to a far larger project, the so-called *Tui-Novel*. In the mid-1930s Brecht began gathering material for what Walter Benjamin described as 'an encyclopaedic overview of the idiocies of the Tellectual-Ins (the intellectuals)'. In the first place, the object was a satirical account of the role of the intellectuals in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic – who had pretended that their spirit might shape society, when in fact they were in the pay of the ruling class. This was the 'Golden Age of the Tuis', before their banishment by the Nazis. The Tuis' teahouse in *Turandot* is distinctly reminiscent of the Viennese coffee-houses in Brecht's 'Unpolitical Letters' of 1933 (*Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp.126–9). The archive contains a vast chaos of further material, sketches, plans and fragmentary drafts. But the ambitious project failed to cohere. Brecht started to discover Tuis almost wherever he looked. The whole notion of the Tuis as a class began to slip out of focus. The conflict between Stalin and Trotsky and the subsequent trials suggested, for example, that the Tuis were still very much a force in

the Soviet Union. His experience of America, on the other hand, seemed to imply that the whole thrust of his satire had been misplaced – in this variety of capitalism, prostituting the intellect had become entirely socially acceptable. Gradually the plan metamorphosed: the Tuis became the excuse-mongers, the intellectual lackeys and henchmen of the powers-that-be in every ideological camp. Intellectual enquiry itself, which in the early modern age, had been a productive force, liberating the emergent bourgeoisie (as portrayed in *Galileo* and represented in the Baconian Tui-motto ‘knowledge is power’), had not only become unproductive, it had actually fallen into the service of the repression of further social development. Still, the novel remained a series of fragments, and the plan for a play was not, for the time being, pursued.

By the 1950s, Brecht’s perspective on all of this had changed quite radically. Whereas in the past he had always conceived of himself as in opposition, now the status of the Berliner Ensemble, and of Brecht as one of the new state’s pre-eminent cultural figures, meant that he was himself a member of the establishment, communicating with ministers, contributing to the development of policy, and making public statements. He was, moreover, genuinely committed to the future of the GDR, and particularly to its younger generation. Especially in the early years, he wrote a number of Laureate-like poems, and took an active part in the work of the new Academy of Arts, of which he was a founding member. So the problem had become a much more urgent and personal one: how should the creative intellectual, how should the artist conduct himself in the service of a state of which he broadly approved? There may be hints even in the 1930s that Brecht recognised himself, ironically, as a Tui; but in the GDR he was unquestionably implicated with the organs of political power. The difficulty of this quite new situation should not be underestimated. For, although he was clearly no distantly critical dissident, the differences between Brecht and his political masters were considerable too. Despite his general loyalty to the Socialist Unity Party (the SED), the defensive nationalism of the new state contradicted Brecht’s fundamentally open, internationalist attitudes. Moreover, there were serious arguments about aesthetics and the cultural heritage. These surfaced intermittently throughout the period, but perhaps most damagingly over Brecht’s and Dessau’s opera version of *Lucullus*, which was compulsorily withdrawn in March 1951 on account both of its modern idiom and of its pacifism (cf. *Collected Plays: 4*). The reprise of the old formalism debates of the 1930s was a particularly depressing experience for Brecht. Differences flared up again in 1953, over a production of the *Urfaust*

and over Eisler's intended Faust opera, both of which the authorities considered an affront to the cultural heritage (cf. *Turandot*, scene 9, and see *Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp.309-30).

Nowhere were the agonised contradictions of Brecht's situation clearer than in his response to the events of 17 June 1953. On that day workers in East Berlin rose up against the government's demands for increased productivity, and were joined in violent demonstrations by a mixed crowd from West Berlin. The disturbances were brutally swept aside by Soviet intervention. Brecht's instant reaction was to assure the Party that, whatever its mistakes in the recent past, he was on its side. His letter to Walter Ulbricht, First Secretary of the SED, was swiftly exploited. The official newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, published just the final sentence, implying all Brecht's support, but none of his criticism. Despite Brecht's anger, the initial outcome was a boost to his status and to that of his theatre. In private, he complained that events had 'alienated the whole of existence' (*Journals*, p.454). To his assistant, Käthe Rüllicke, he wrote, 'Difficult days. The whitewashers are hard at it. Then again: what a chance to be a good Communist!' (BFA 30, p.180). There is no question that, from this point on, Brecht found it more difficult to lend the regime his wholehearted support.

This was the moment then, in response to the new Tuism of the German Democratic Republic, to the tensions between Moscow and East Berlin, and specifically in reaction to the workers' uprising, that Brecht got out the old files and disentangled his *Turandot* once more from the complex of Tui-material. Now the play was relatively quickly written. One of the primary objects had become to illuminate the role of the intellectual 'whitewashers' of a regime which was becoming increasingly bureaucratic and dictatorial. As he writes in the Preface to *Turandot*, 'unconvinced but cowardly, hostile but cowering, ossified officials began again to govern against the population' (see p. 247). The material also offered Brecht an opportunity to point up traumatic continuities with the Nazi past, a matter which was very much in his mind if we are to judge by the poems of the *Buckow Elegies* which date from these years. At the same time, he could gesture across to the recent success of the Chinese Revolution, which he understood as the outcome of a genuinely popular movement, and so a salutary contrast to the imported Stalinist bureaucracy of the GDR. The German people had not risen up and overthrown their criminal regime, and Brecht was mistrustful of their ability to act as a basis for the development of Socialism.

xxii Introduction

There was a time
When all was different here.
The butcher's wife knows.
The postman has too erect a gait.
And what was the electrician?
(‘Eight Years Ago’, *Poems*, p.443)

Turandot or The Whitewashers' Congress is Brecht's last (more or less) completed play. He contemplated publishing it in the *Versuche* (*Experiments*) series, and even planned a production, first under Harry Buckwitz, then under Benno Besson in Rostock (with Regine Lutz as Turandot, Helene Weigel as the Dowager, Ernst Busch as A Sha Sen, and Ekkehard Schall as Wang, the Secretary of the Tui Academy). There was even a brief flurry of rehearsals in spring 1954, when Brecht revised the text. According to Käthe Rülcke he was, however, still dissatisfied, and would have returned to it in 1955 had not the preparation of publications and of productions at the Berliner Ensemble and elsewhere intervened. In the event, Brecht died without ever coming back to the play. It was not published in German until 1967.

The première of *Turandot* took place on 5 February 1969 at the Zurich Schauspielhaus under the direction of Benno Besson and Horst Sagert, with music by Yehoshua Lakner. It had a mixed reception. No one seemed quite sure what the targets of the satire were. Subsequent productions in Cologne (1971), East Berlin (1973) and elsewhere provoked similar confusion. The confrontation of exuberant popular theatre styles with the complex political ambiguities of the parable has left generations of critics groping for a clear line. To this day it remains a difficult work, full of richly associative satirical material and wonderfully lively farce, but unwieldy on the stage. It invites revision by a firm hand.

* * *

1953 was a crucial year, both for the GDR and for Brecht. The year began with the death of Stalin in March, provoking wild turns in the Soviet attitude to the GDR. Meanwhile, the East German Academy of Arts promoted a major conference on Stanislavsky, the theorist of an emotional theatre, who seemed to represent everything Brecht opposed. Brecht did not attend. Then came the workers' uprising in June, and all the political tensions consequent upon that. The state was struggling to assert its legitimacy, not on the basis of popular support (which it did not enjoy), but rather on the basis of a particular interpretation of German history. That is why the cultural

debates were so vehement. Brecht's adaptations of Lenz's *The Tutor*, his work with *Faust*, *Turandot*, and even *The Days of the Commune*, were all designed to some extent to develop a critique of the class of teachers, public servants and bureaucrats, who, according to Brecht, had provided key support for Nazism, and were now to blame for the ills of the Socialist Republic. The particularly craven behaviour of this middle-class intelligentsia was seen as a long-term product of the failure of Germany's progressive social forces in the eighteenth century. The SED, by contrast, sought to uphold the idea of the GDR as the legitimate heir to the best progressive traditions – while all the worst aspects of the past, including the Fascist past, could be located in the West. In the spirit of dialectics, Brecht appears at times to have relished the ferocious ideological exchanges with the authorities which resulted from these differences, but the continuing experience of criticism and censorship by what he saw as the lesser cultural functionaries was taking its toll. His insistence on the 'German Misere' interpretation of history was seen as treasonous, and even *Mother Courage* was attacked for its 'pacifism, decadence and negativity'. Amongst the very sparse diary entries for 1953, Brecht noted that 'our performances in Berlin have almost no resonance any more', and later that, if there were free elections, the Nazis might well be returned (*Journals*, pp.454 and 455).

Nevertheless, the end of 1953 saw a relative upturn in Brecht's situation. He moved into a new flat in central Berlin, and the German collected works edition began with his *Plays One*; there were several interesting productions in hand. The political unrest had in fact given force to his own arguments and strengthened the hands of his allies. At the beginning of 1954 the various commissions for the arts were replaced by a new Ministry for Culture, partly in response to Brecht's vigorous campaigning. The new Minister was an old colleague, Johannes R. Becher, and Brecht served on an advisory committee. Gradually, the old 'formalism' arguments were allowed to wither away. In March 1954 some of the pressures on the Berliner Ensemble were relieved when at last, after extensive building-works, they were able to move into the old Schiffbauerdamm Theatre (where they opened with Molière's *Don Juan*). Brecht himself directed the première of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in June. He became vice-president of the Academy in July, and in December 1954 was awarded the Stalin Prize (the ceremony took place in Moscow in May 1955). Brecht chose to interpret the award as encouragement for his work for peace, and for a peaceful unification of Germany. At the same time, work on the many productions of the Berliner Ensemble, and on films and productions of his own plays by other companies,

continued. He participated in the hugely successful Berliner Ensemble tours to Paris, with *Mother Courage* in 1954 and with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1955. In 1956 he began preparing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* for London.

Also from about 1954, however, an elegiac tone begins to enter Brecht's poems and an unmistakable air of disappointment and exhaustion invades his sparse journal entries and letters. 'This country still gives me the creeps,' one note reads. To Becher he ended up complaining, 'the era of collectivism has become largely an era of monologue' (*Journals*, p.458, *Letters*, p.559). He was suffering from minor ailments, worried about his eyesight and his heart. Early in 1956 he had a brief stay in hospital, where he was treated for the after-effects of a bout of influenza. He died of a heart attack on 14 August 1956, shortly before the London season opened.

His early death, aged 58, spared him much of the recrimination within the Communist Party following upon Krushchev's revelation of Stalin's 'crimes' at the Twentieth Party Congress. He did not live to see either the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Uprising, or the hardening of political attitudes which was to lead before long to the building of the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, Brecht's years in the GDR had been dominated by the escalating Cold War and by the many conflicts between his engagement with the ideas of Socialism and their far from perfect realisation in the difficult world of a divided post-Fascist Germany. It is hardly surprising that he had not had all that much time for original compositions. Instead, his priority had been to devote himself to cultural politics, and to the promotion of his vision of the role of the arts and of the theatre in the newly Socialist half of the country.

The three plays in this volume are nonetheless challenging literary documents of those negotiations, important experiments in textual adaptation and quotation and in the epic mode, and models of a new political drama, able to respond allusively to historical change. Despite some similarities in the working methods behind them, they are also astonishingly different. One would hardly imagine that this serious verse adaptation from Sophocles, this semi-naturalistic historical drama, and this funny, sprawling comedy could all be by the same author. The range of Brecht's interests and the variety of his responses to his situation continue to surprise.

Increasingly also, Brecht had been giving his energies as a mentor to new writers and to the younger members of the Ensemble. He had developed projects for and with them, bequeathing a whole generation of Brechtian directors, writers and actors to the theatres of both East and West. It was they who were to continue the struggles of the

creative intellectual, wrestling with the details of commitment: to Communism, to the East German state, and to the discipline of dialectics. To theatre and to song.

THE EDITORS

Chronology

- 1898 10 February: Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht born in Augsburg.
- 1917 Autumn: Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Brecht to Munich university.
- 1918 Work on his first play, *Baal*. In Augsburg Brecht is called up as medical orderly till end of year. Elected to Soldiers' Council as Independent Socialist (USPD) following Armistice.
- 1919 Brecht writing second play *Drums in the Night*. In January Spartacist Rising in Berlin. Foundation of German Communist Party (KPD). Rosa Luxemburg murdered. April-May: Bavarian Soviet. Summer: Weimar Republic constituted. Birth of Brecht's illegitimate son Frank Banholzer.
- 1920 May: death of Brecht's mother in Augsburg.
- 1921 Brecht leaves university without a degree. Reads Rimbaud.
- 1922 A turning point in the arts. End of utopian Expressionism; new concern with technology. Brecht's first visit to Berlin, seeing theatres, actors, publishers and cabaret. He writes 'Of Poor BB' on the return journey. Autumn: becomes a dramaturg in Munich. Première of *Drums in the Night*, a prize-winning national success. Marries Marianne Zoff, an opera singer.
- 1923 Galloping German inflation stabilised by November currency reform. In Munich Hitler's new National Socialist party stages unsuccessful 'beer-cellar putsch'.
- 1924 'Neue Sachlichkeit' exhibition at Mannheim gives its name to the new sobriety in the arts. Brecht to Berlin as assistant in Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater.
- 1925 Field-Marshal von Hindenburg becomes President. Elisabeth Hauptmann starts working with Brecht. Two seminal films: Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*. Brecht writes birthday tribute to Bernard Shaw.
- 1926 Première of *Man equals Man* in Darmstadt. Now a freelance; starts reading Marx. His first book of poems, the *Devotions*, includes the 'Legend of the Dead Soldier'.
- 1927 After reviewing the poems and a broadcast of *Man equals Man*, Kurt Weill approaches Brecht for a libretto. Result is the

- text of *Mahagonny*, whose 'Songspiel' version is performed in a boxing-ring at Hindemith's Baden-Baden music festival in July. In Berlin Brecht helps adapt *The Good Soldier Schweik* for Piscator's high-tech theatre.
- 1928 August 31: première of *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht and Weill, based on Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*.
- 1929 Start of Stalin's policy of 'socialism in one country'. Divorced from Marianne, Brecht now marries the actress Helene Weigel. May 1: Berlin police break up banned KPD demonstration, witnessed by Brecht. Summer: Brecht writes two didactic music-theatre pieces with Weill and Hindemith, and neglects *The Threepenny Opera's* successor *Happy End*, which is a flop. From now on he stands by the KPD. Autumn: Wall Street crash initiates world economic crisis. Cuts in German arts budgets combine with renewed nationalism to create cultural backlash.
- 1930 Nazi election successes; end of parliamentary government. Unemployed 3 million in first quarter, about 5 million at end of the year. March: première of the full-scale *Mahagonny* opera in Leipzig Opera House.
- 1931 German crisis intensifies. Aggressive KPD arts policy: agit-prop theatre, marching songs, political photomontage. In Moscow the Comintern forms international associations of revolutionary artists, writers, musicians and theatre people.
- 1932 Première of Brecht's agitational play *The Mother* (after Gorky) with Eisler's music. *Kuble Wampe*, his militant film with Eisler, is held up by the censors. He meets Sergei Tretyakov at the film's première in Moscow. Summer: the Nationalist Von Papen is made Chancellor. He denounces 'cultural bolshevism', and deposes the SPD-led Prussian administration.
- 1933 January 30: Hitler becomes Chancellor with Papen as his deputy. The Prussian Academy is purged; Goering becomes Prussian premier. A month later the Reichstag is burnt down, the KPD outlawed. The Brechts instantly leave via Prague; at first homeless. Eisler is in Vienna, Weill in Paris, where he agrees to compose a ballet with song texts by Brecht: *The Seven Deadly Sins*, premièred there in June. In Germany Nazi students burn books; all parties and trade unions banned; first measures against the Jews. Summer: Brecht in Paris works on anti-Nazi publications. With the advance on his *Threepenny Novel* he buys a house on Fyn island, Denmark, overlooking the Svendborg Sound, where the family will spend the next six years. Margarete Steffin, a young Berlin Communist, goes with

- them. Autumn: he meets the Danish Communist actress Ruth Berlau, a doctor's wife.
- 1934 Spring: suppression of Socialist rising in Austria. Eisler stays with Brecht to work on *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* songs. Summer: Brecht misses the first Congress of Soviet Writers, chaired by Zhdanov along the twin lines of Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism. October: in London with Eisler.
- 1935 Italy invades Ethiopia. Hitler enacts the Nuremberg Laws against the Jews. March–May: Brecht to Moscow for international theatre conference. Meets Kun and Knorin of Comintern Executive. Eisler becomes president of the International Music Bureau. At the 7th Comintern Congress Dimitrov calls for all antifascist parties to unite in Popular Fronts against Hitler and Mussolini. Autumn: Brecht with Eisler to New York for Theatre Union production of *The Mother*.
- 1936 Soviet purges lead to arrests of many Germans in USSR, most of them Communists; among them Carola Neher and Ernst Ottwalt, friends of the Brechts. International cultural associations closed down. Official campaign against 'Formalism' in the arts. Mikhail Koltsov, the Soviet journalist, founds *Das Wort* as a literary magazine for the German emigration, with Brecht as one of the editors. Popular Front government in Spain resisted by Franco and other generals, with the support of the Catholic hierarchy. The Spanish Civil War becomes a great international cause.
- 1937 Summer: in Munich, opening of Hitler's House of German Art. Formally, the officially approved art is closely akin to Russian 'Socialist Realism'. In Russia Tretiakov is arrested as a Japanese spy, interned in Siberia and later shot. October: Brecht's Spanish war play *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, with Weigel in the title part, is performed in Paris, and taken up by antifascist and amateur groups in many countries.
- 1938 January: in Moscow Meyerhold's avant-garde theatre is abolished. March: Hitler takes over Austria without resistance. It becomes part of Germany. May 21: première of scenes from Brecht's *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* in a Paris hall. Autumn: Munich Agreement, by which Britain, France and Italy force Czechoslovakia to accept Hitler's demands. In Denmark Brecht writes the first version of *Galileo*. In Moscow Koltsov disappears into arrest after returning from Spain.
- 1939 March: Hitler takes over Prague and the rest of the Czech territories. Madrid surrenders to Franco; end of the Civil War.