

methuen | drama

COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED

**BRECHT**  
**ON**  
**THEATRE**

**THIRD EDITION**

Edited By Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn

B L O O M S B U R Y

# Brecht on Theatre

*Also by Bertolt Brecht*

PLAYS

**Brecht Collected Plays: One**

(Baal, Drums in the Night, In the Jungle of Cities, The Life of Edward II of England, A Respectable Wedding, The Beggar or the Dead Dog, Driving Out a Devil, Lux in Tenebris, The Catch) **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)

**Brecht Collected Plays: Three**

(Lindbergh's Flight, The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent, He Said Yes/ He Said No, The Decision, The Mother, The Exception and the Rule, The Horations and the Curiatians, St Joan of the Stockyards) **Brecht Collected**

**Plays: Four**

(Round Heads and Pointed Heads, Fear and Misery of the Third Reich, Señora Carrar's Rifles, Dansen, How Much Is Your Iron?, The Trial of Lucullus)

**Brecht Collected Plays: Five**

(Life of Galileo, Mother Courage and Her Children) **Brecht Collected Plays: Six**

(The Good Person of Szechwan, The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, Mr Puntilla and His Man Matti) **Brecht Collected Plays: Seven**

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Brecht on Art and Politics

Brecht on Film and Radio

Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Modelbooks Collected Short Stories of Bertolt Brecht Bertolt Brecht Journals 1934–1955

# Brecht on Theatre

Bertolt Brecht

*Edited by*

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Marc Silberman and John Willett

Third edition

B L O O M S B U R Y  
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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.<sup>1</sup> The Brecht Archive was only just being organized in East Berlin, and he was able to get access to some additional 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.<sup>2</sup>

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' 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 'estrangle'.

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.

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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.

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

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

<sup>3</sup> R. Barthes, ‘The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism’, *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 71–6.

## 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). This is not only a matter of people's love of music, however – it has more to do with their taste for pomp and pageantry, and also with sheer habit. In other cities, where the audiences are not much more intelligent than they are here, the opera does not enjoy greater popularity than the drama by any means. And with the money used to create such a very average opera as that of the Augsburgers, it would be possible to cultivate really good drama here – drama for the exceptions! That's why I think the Augsburgers need, sooner or later, to kick their favourite habit of having bad drama.

[*'Eine Abrechnung'*, BFA 21/63-5]

First published in *Der Volkswille*, 14 May 1920. Between October 1919 and January 1921, Brecht wrote some two dozen theatre critiques for *Der Volkswille*, an Augsburg newspaper that supported the USPD (Independent Socialist Party). The classical acting roles he refers to are Valentin, Margarete's brother in Goethe's *Faust*, Don Carlos and Elisabeth in Schiller's *Don Carlos* and Maria in Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena*.

## **On the Aesthetics of Drama**

However abhorrent the mixing of two styles within one work of art can be, all it takes is the accumulation of this fault for it to have a real impact: people start mixing more styles. Monumentalism serves as an excuse for anything. I don't know why the youngest generation of playwrights feel such a desperate need to keep messing around with their material in the attempt to modernize it, and why

they should begin by reforming language, when in fact language is the thing that should seem the least calculated, the least cumbersome, the least weighty of all; it should almost float. Language loses all its charm when it feels too studied and arbitrary – whenever it seems to be an object, in fact. These are the efforts of a narrow-minded generation. Why seek out new building blocks for an architecture that already has such infinite potential for new ideas! I could picture a celestial farce in the style of El Greco, in which archetypal events would be played out, a play of ideas, full of corporeality and wickedness. Or what about the political comedy of epic proportions? The foundations of the bourgeoisie have barely been explored, and vast tracts of human affairs lie desolate – this nation’s imaginative powers are ossified, its inventiveness dried up. People can just about manage to invent new patterns for neckties. Generally speaking, where there is still some perspective, there are *e.g.* only two ways of considering bourgeois problems: the satirical and the pathetic. There are no alternatives. What’s more, the same dramatic style has been used over and over again far too often, as if it had not long since buried the content of any performance beneath a strange sort of insulating layer. The depiction of death on the stage is no longer distressing, only interesting (at best). Characters die in a variety of ways, but these are limited in number. Just like in the opera, where you will find one of the scenes from *Aida* taking place on the rostrum from *Lohengrin*, in the theatre you often find a death from one play taking place in another. Come, let the revolution begin!

[‘*Zur Ästhetik des Dramas*’, BFA 21/ 95-6]

Written in 1920 (see [Plate 1](#) for a contemporary image of an unconventional theatre).

### **On the ‘Downfall of Theatre’**

Nowadays, on the whole, theatre is in a satisfactory state, when you think how it has improved in the space of just a few years. About five years ago, when I was starting out, things were still looking very grim. They had set up a grandiose sort of clearance sale with five or six styles and had already started working their way through the most profound problems of humanity. They had been forced to seek out impulses of their own and had found a few neat little tricks that allowed them to play by the book. The public, displaying an inexplicable reluctance to stay away from the theatre, took every vacillation for a definite direction; they felt much, understood little and paid for everything. A small circle of intellectually superior persons got complimentary tickets in any case, and this

enabled them to take the enormous risk of going to the theatre, given that they were at least not risking anything financially. There was an unhealthy vitality in the air and nobody in the theatre world, any more than those in higher places, was aware of the existence of a global catastrophe. Then suddenly around the time of the economic recovery and reactionary clamp-down, word started to go around that everything which was being put on at the theatre was, unfortunately, worthless (present company excepted). The theatre, it was said, did produce some really top-class performances; the actors were unsurpassable; the plays were magnificent, they showed undreamt-of innovation. Practically every other performance a historic event. But all this, apparently, was not enough to make it worth going to the theatre any more. Around the time when taxi drivers were finding that there was no longer money to be made in conveyance, people in the theatre were getting the feeling that theatre was finished. And they had, moreover, been given excellent advice.

Things have improved enormously. The idea has started to filter through to people that it is really not worth going to see the great B. and the sublime K., and that what the immortal H. may or may not write is sublimely unimportant.

[‘Über den “Untergang des Theaters” ’, BFA 21/114]

Written in 1925. The initials ‘B’ and ‘K’ probably refer to well-known actors and ‘H’ to Gerhart Hauptmann.

## **More Good Sport**

Our hopes are pinned on the sporting public.

We can’t deny it – we’ve got our eye on those enormous concrete bowls, filled with 15,000 human beings of every class and every physiognomy, the fairest and shrewdest audience in the world: 15,000 people who are prepared to pay high prices, and who calculate on the basis of a sensible system of supply and demand. You can’t expect fair conduct on a sinking ship. The perversity of our theatre audiences stems from the fact that neither theatre nor audience has any idea what is actually meant to be going on. In sports arenas people know when they buy their ticket exactly what is going to happen, and that is exactly what does happen once they have taken their seats: highly trained individuals, displaying a keen sense of responsibility but at the same time making us believe they are acting primarily for their own enjoyment, deploy their own particular strengths in the way most agreeable to them. *The traditional theatre, by contrast, has become completely faceless.*

There is no reason why the theatre shouldn’t have its own ‘good sport’. There

are buildings designed for use as theatres which are currently just standing there haemorrhaging money – if we could only see these buildings as more or less empty spaces, ideal for the pursuit of ‘good sport’, then we would undoubtedly be able to use them in a way that might have some value for contemporary audiences, earning today’s money and eating today’s beef.

It could be argued, of course, that some playgoers want to see something other than ‘sport’ in the theatre. But we simply haven’t seen any kind of indication that the audiences filling theatres these days *want anything at all*. The mild resistance of playgoers to the idea of giving up their old theatre seats, the ones they inherited from their grandfathers, should not be painted as a fresh surge of enthusiasm on their part.

People are always telling us we should not produce only what is in demand. But I do think that an artist, even one who sits holed up in the proverbial garret producing work for the benefit of future generations, is unlikely to accomplish anything without some wind in his sails. And this wind has to be the prevailing wind in his own time, and not some future wind. There is nothing to say in which direction this wind should take him (it’s common knowledge that as long you have a wind you can sail against it, but that sailing with no wind at all, or with tomorrow’s wind, is impossible), and it is highly unlikely that an artist will achieve anything like his full potential impact today if he is sailing with today’s wind. The impact a play creates today should not be used as evidence of how far it engages with (or fails to engage with) its audience. It doesn’t work like that at all with theatres.

*A theatre which fails to engage with its audience is nonsensical.* Which means that our theatre is nonsensical. Even now, the theatre fails to engage with its audience because it has no idea what people want from it. It can no longer do what it once could, and even if it was still able to, that would no longer be what people want. But the theatre stubbornly goes on doing what it can no longer do and what people no longer want. These days not one of those well-heated, attractively lit, imposing buildings with their exorbitant running costs, and not one of the performances staged inside them, offers you any *fun* for your five cents. There is not a theatre around today that could invite a few of those people reputed to find fun in playwriting along to one of its performances and then expect them to feel the urge to write a play for that theatre. The playwrights can see at a glance that there is no *fun* to be had here, no wind to fill anyone’s sails. There is no ‘good sport’ here.

Take the actors, for instance. I am not suggesting that there are less talented actors now than there have been in the past, but I do doubt that there has ever been such an exhausted, exploited, panic-driven, artificially whipped-up band of

actors as ours. *And a man who is not having fun himself cannot expect anyone to have fun watching him.*

Of course, the people at the top lay the blame on those below them, and the most common scapegoat is the harmless garret. The garret becomes the sole object of people's wrath: the plays are no good. To which it must be said that as long as these plays have been fun to write, they are bound to be better than the theatre that puts them on and the audience that goes to see them. A play is quite simply unrecognizable once it has passed through this meat grinder. When we say that both we and the audience had imagined things differently – that we are in favour, for instance, of elegance, lightness, dryness, objectivity – the theatre will reply naively, 'Those passions you have singled out, my dear sir, are not to be found beneath the breast of any tuxedo.' As if even a patricide could not be committed in an elegant, sober and, as it were, a classically rounded way!

What we are being offered, however, is not real skill but just a series of convulsions dressed up as intensity. They are no longer capable of staging anything that is in any way remarkable and thus worth seeing. Right from the start, the actor – in his dark compulsion to stop his audience from fleeing – is driven by such unnatural momentum that he makes it seem the most ordinary thing in the world to insult his father. At the same time, however, it is clear to everyone watching that acting takes a great deal out of him. *And a man for whom acting is visibly a strain will, even if he's fairly good, also exert a strain on everyone in the stall.*

I don't share the view of those who bewail the rapid decline of the West, claiming that it is practically unstoppable. I believe there is such a wealth of subject matter worth seeing, characters worth admiring and lessons worth learning that, once a good sporting spirit sets in, we would feel that we had to build theatres if they did not already exist. The most encouraging thing about theatres nowadays, however, is the people leaving by the front and back doors after performances: they are dissatisfied.

[*'Mehr guten Sport'*, BFA 21/119-22]

First published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 6 February 1926. The theatre section of the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* was then under the direction of Herbert Ihering, who had been responsible for awarding the Kleist Prize to Brecht's *Drums in the Night* in 1922 and became one of his staunchest advocates. This article appeared eight days before the Berlin production of Brecht's first play *Baal*, which he staged himself in collaboration with Oscar Homolka. His friend Arnolt Bronnen's *Patricide*, referred to in the

article, had been the object of his first attempt at production in 1922, but was taken over by another producer because of the actors' resistance to Brecht's conception of the play. In the final paragraph, Brecht refers to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.

## Three Cheers for Shaw

### 1. Shaw's terrorism

Shaw is speaking from experience when he suggests that we cannot express ourselves with real frankness on any subject until we have overcome a certain instinctive fear – that of being arrogant. He secured himself early on against the possibility of anybody ever burning incense to him at any point in his life (and he did so without any fear of fame. It is clear to Shaw that no honest man's toolkit is complete without that one essential piece of equipment, his own trumpet. He has proudly refused to hide his light under a bushel.)

Shaw has applied much of his talent to intimidating people – intimidating them to a point where they would need nerves of steel even just to crawl before him on hands and knees.

It will have become clear by now that Shaw is a terrorist. Shaw's brand of terror is an unusual one, and he uses an unusual weapon, that of humour. This unusual man seems to feel that there is nothing in the world to be feared except the calm and incorruptible gaze of an ordinary human being – that this, however, is to be feared at all costs. This theory endows him with a great natural superiority, and by applying it systematically he has effectively ensured that anyone who ever encounters him, be it in print, on the stage or in the flesh, will find it inconceivable that this man could have done or said anything in his life without fearing that incorruptible eye. Indeed, even younger people – whose aggressiveness is often one of their defining features – tend to keep their onslaughts on Shaw to a minimum. They sense that any attack on one of his habits, even the tendency to wear unusual underwear, would almost certainly end in crushing humiliation for their own ill-advised attire. And we mustn't forget that it was Shaw who did away with the mindless custom of speaking in hushed tones, instead of loudly and cheerfully, in anything resembling a place of worship, and he who proved that the right attitude to take towards any really important phenomenon is a *casual* (flippant) one, because that is the only attitude which permits complete concentration and true attentiveness. If we consider all this, we can understand how great a degree of personal freedom he has achieved.



Shaw's terrorism lies in his assertion that every person has the right to act, in any situation, with decency, logic and humour, and has a duty to do so even when this might cause offence. He knows just how much courage it takes to laugh at what is funny, and how much seriousness is needed to identify what is funny. And on the other hand, like anyone pursuing a definite goal, he knows that the most time-consuming and distracting thing is a certain type of seriousness popular in literature but nowhere else. (As a playwright he finds the idea of writing for the theatre just as naïve as we young writers do, and he shows no desire to feign ignorance of the fact; he makes abundant use of this naivety. He gives the theatre as much fun as it can take. And it can take a *lot*. What people want to see when they go to the theatre is, strictly speaking, a lot of inconsequential nonsense that places a heavy burden on the really important matters, the ones that genuinely interest the sophisticated dramatist and constitute the true value of his plays. As a result, his problems must be so good that he can safely commit certain transgressions alongside them – and it is the transgressions that people will be interested in.)

## **2. Shaw defended against his own gloomy forebodings**

I seem to remember that Shaw himself recently formulated his views on the future of the drama. He said that in future people would no longer go to the theatre to understand things. What he probably meant was that simply reproducing reality does not, oddly enough, convey an impression of authenticity. The younger generation will not contradict Shaw in this, but I must point out that Shaw's own dramatic works eclipsed those of his contemporaries precisely because they appealed so unabashedly to reason. His world is one built around opinions. The opinions of his characters constitute their fates. Shaw constructs a play by inventing a series of complications that give his characters the opportunity to express their opinions as fully as possible and to oppose them to our own. (No complication is ever too familiar or too well-worn for him – he has no pretensions in this respect. A perfectly ordinary usurer is worth a mint to Shaw; a patriotic girl features in the story and all that matters to him is that this girl's tale should seem as familiar to us as possible, and that the usurer's sticky end should be as unremarkable and as desirable as possible, so that he may strip us all the more thoroughly of our outdated opinions about these characters – and above all about *their* opinions.)

Every trait of every one of Shaw's characters can probably be attributed to the delight he takes in confounding our habitual associations. He knows that we

have a terrible habit of lumping together all the traits of a particular human type under a single umbrella. We imagine a usurer as cowardly, sneaky and brutal. Not for a second do we entertain the idea that a usurer might be courageous in any way. Or elegiac, or tender-hearted. Shaw does.

Then there is the matter of the hero. Shaw's refreshing view that heroes are not exemplars of human behaviour, and that heroism consists of an obscure but very lively hotchpotch of highly contradictory characteristics, has led his less gifted successors to the unfortunate conclusion that there is no such thing as either heroism or heroes. But to Shaw this probably doesn't really matter. He seems to find it more congenial to live among ordinary people than heroes anyway.

Shaw displays great openness with regard to the composition of his works. He does not sit there patiently waiting for his work to be scrutinized by the public. In order to lend weight to his own opinions he invites scrutiny; he himself is always pointing out his own idiosyncrasies, his own individual tastes, and even his own (minor) weaknesses. For this he must be thanked. Even when his opinions go very much against those of the present young generation, they will listen to him with pleasure; he is, and what more could be said of any man, a good man. Moreover, his is an era that seems to conserve opinions better than it does moods and emotions. Of everything that has been recorded in our epoch, it seems, opinions are the most enduring.

### **3. Fun is catching**

It is (tellingly) very difficult to find out anything about the opinions of other European writers. But I imagine that on the subject of literature, for example, they all share more or less the same view – that writing is a melancholy business. Shaw, who makes known his views on every subject under the sun, again differs from his colleagues in not agreeing with them on this point. (It is not his fault – a thorn in his side, at most – that the extent to which Shaw's opinions on just about any subject in the world differ from those of other European writers is never made sufficiently clear because these other writers, when they actually have opinions, are not willing to express them.) But Shaw would agree with me, at least, when I say that he *likes* writing. Even *on* his head there is no room for a martyr's crown of thorns. His literary activities have in no way cut him off from life: quite the opposite. I am not sure if it is any measure of his talent, but I can only say that the effects of his inimitable cheerfulness and infectious good mood are quite extraordinary. Shaw actually manages to give the impression that his

mental and physical well-being increase with every sentence he writes. Reading his work may not induce Dionysian intoxication, but there is no doubt that it is extraordinarily good for the health. And his only enemies (if they need be mentioned at all) would have to be the kind of people who don't care much about health.

As for Shaw's actual ideas, I cannot at the moment recall a single one that could be called characteristic of him, though I know of course that there are many; however, I could name plenty that he has found to be characteristic of other people. And Shaw himself probably feels that his way of viewing things is more important than his actual views anyway. That says a lot about a man like him.

I get the impression that for Shaw, a lot revolves around a particular theory of evolution that in his view differs greatly, and decisively, from another evolutionary theory of a fundamentally inferior kind. At any rate, his faith in human beings' infinite capacity for improvement plays a crucial role in his works. It will be understood that I am giving three heartfelt cheers for Shaw when I openly admit that despite not really being familiar enough with either of these two theories, I blindly and unconditionally support Shaw's. Because it is my belief that a man of such sagacity and such fearless eloquence is wholly to be trusted. Just as it is always my belief, at any time and under any circumstances, that the force of a statement is more important than its usability, and that a man's calibre is more important than the course of action he chooses to pursue.

[*'Ovation für Shaw'*, BFA 21/149-53]

First published in *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 25 July 1926. The essay was a tribute for Shaw's seventieth birthday, written for the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna. Shaw's *Saint Joan* – one of the precursors of Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* – was produced by Max Reinhardt at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, on 14 October 1924, a fortnight before Erich Engel's production of Brecht's *In the Jungle* in the same theatre. Brecht was on the theatre's staff and attended Reinhardt's rehearsals.

## Prologue to *Drums*

### 1. Conversation with George Grosz

What the bourgeoisie finds fault with in the proletarian is his poor complexion. I reckon, George Grosz, that what has made you an enemy of the bourgeois is his

physiognomy. It is common knowledge that a state of war currently exists between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This war, admittedly, is not down to a difference in tastes, if the arguments on both sides are to be believed. However, these arguments are specious and inconclusive and what is more, nobody ever takes any notice of them. Injustices are committed by the bourgeoisie, but then injustices are committed everywhere. You and I, George Grosz, are opposed to injustice (as everybody is) but we would be less opposed to it if the proletariat were in a position to commit injustices too. What I mean to say is that it cannot be injustice that drives you to 'take up your brush'. If on the other hand it turned out that you could not actually perceive the injustice, you would be a counterrevolutionary and I would shoot you and raise a memorial to you. I don't believe, Grosz, that you woke up one day with an overwhelming desire – born of overwhelming sympathy for the exploited or anger at the exploiter – to put pen to paper and express this in a drawing. What I think is that drawing was always a source of amusement for you, and that certain people's physiognomies gave you an outlet for it. I can picture you discovering one day that you were powerfully and irresistibly drawn to a particular type of face, seeing in it a marvellous opportunity for you to indulge in your favourite source of amusement. This was the 'face of the ruling class'. I appreciate that it may have been the desire to protest which moved you to portray those people who saw themselves as the elite of humanity – and who needed to be an elite, this being the only way to get away with such swinish behaviour – as actual swine. In terms of protest, there was no truth to be revealed by reducing a proletarian type to his fundamental form, so to speak. The proletarian had no reason to want to be anything other than what he was. The immense effort it cost him just to stay alive meant that he simply assumed his most authentic basic form of his own accord. Any kind of luxury was out of the question. The bourgeois types all did business by appearing to be better than they really were, but the proletarian doesn't ever do business. The position of art these days mirrors your own: the type you are drawn to as subject cannot form part of your intended audience. Politically you regard the bourgeoisie as your enemy not because you are a proletarian but because you are an artist. Your political position (which unlike you I consider a secondary concern, as you can see) is your position in relation to your audience (not in relation to your subject). I have been through this process myself – not as fruitfully as you, by any means, but no less in earnest. I refer you to one of my plays, which did not go down at all well with those who share your political opinions: the little comedy *Drums in the Night*.

## 2. *The success of Drums in the Night among the bourgeoisie*

This play was performed on around fifty bourgeois stages. It did very well, which proved only one thing: I was knocking at the wrong door. I was entirely dissatisfied with the play's success. At first I was unable to work out why. I just had a bad feeling about it. I had the vague notion that these people who were so desperately eager to shake my hand were the very rabble I'd been wanting to bash over the head, not in this particular play perhaps, but in general. I felt like a man who has fired a cannon at people he dislikes, only to find himself being celebrated as a hero by those same people because he has managed to fire loaves of bread by mistake. When I then consulted the newspapers to find out what had happened, I discovered that the play's success lay largely in the furious onslaughts of critics in the artistically reactionary press. There were still some, then, who were prepared to find fault with the bread!

The whole thing was a question of aesthetics, which I couldn't begin to understand. At another time, I suppose, I might have understood it to a certain extent, but at that point – with New York expanding and Moscow being destroyed and both things seeming likely to affect the whole world – aesthetics seemed to be completely irrelevant. The bourgeois theatre, equally incapable of staging both the oldest and the most up-to-date plays, imagined that its continued existence was nothing more than a question of styles. The sinking theatre, like a sinking ship, concerned itself with the admittedly difficult but essentially pointless question of whether it was better to capsize to the left or to the right. And the crew criticized the musicians, who in the midst of the confusion carried on playing their 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' – meaning the God who is always on the side of the biggest battalions. I must point out, so as not to be horribly misunderstood, that this image may be an unsuitable one to use for the sinking of the theatre because the theatre was so much more expensive than an old ship, and worth much less, and those who sank with it were really no great loss – quite the opposite, in fact. Audiences and artists alike, after a little introspection, agreed that the sinking of the theatre was inevitable, and the theatres paid for these cries of desperation out of their advertising revenues.

I have always thought of myself as a man who is able (with the help of a few drinks and cigars) to turn out a literary work which upon lucid reflection he would see as desirable. The thing is that when I go about things this way, I never know what the result will be. I'm not talking about aesthetic results here, of course. *Drums* is a perfect example of the weakness of human will. I wrote it for money. But although I did, amazingly enough, make some money from it, I'd be lying if I said that my efforts had met with great success. A few people managed to give me money for it; but I had managed to write a political play.

### 3. The love story

Given that my choice of subject matter for this play was influenced by financial considerations, it may be of public interest to note that I felt a love story was absolutely vital. The writing of the play was a serious commercial enterprise, and this helped me appreciate exactly what the paying public wanted and needed. (From this play, in other words, I gained experience in greed and writing.) So I was willing to give the audience a love story, but naturally the aspect of it that interested me more than anything else was the question of ownership. Indeed, the character of Kragler – who seemed to me to be the typical hero of the moment – would permit nothing else. He wanted a particular woman, and if he could not get her, the only emotion he was capable of was that of a man who does not get a house he once owned or wishes to own. I did not feel the need to go into the reasons for his desire. As a matter of fact, I did not make the woman particularly desirable. She has a certain run-of-the-mill sensuality, which cannot be called intense because it is so easily satisfied – independently, in effect, of its object, her partner. Her sex drive is never anything more than moderate and routine. It disturbs nobody; a far cry from that urgent, almost revolutionary demand for physical gratification that arises when a woman needs to have sex with someone and has to take whoever she can get. A man, for Anna Balicke, is not a basic commodity but a cheap luxury item. In bourgeois society, the erotic sphere is exhausted. Literature confirms this in that sex no longer generates any associations. In fact, the greatest erotic vitality is probably to be found in that crude literature (occurring in the form of notoriously potent words) that ordinary people wield with such naïve artistry. The fact that they refrain from using vulgar words around women can mean only one thing: that these words can be relied upon to have an effect. The most tragic misfortune that can befall a pair of lovers these days is not being able to find a room. It is difficult to know, unfortunately, whether things are any different now from the way they used to be, because you can't really ask your father to tell you about his sex life, but it is easy to ascertain the current appeal of vulgar words to do with sex and sexual organs. The enjoyment of dirty words depends largely on their guaranteed obscenity. And sometimes even the enjoyment of sex depends on its guaranteed obscenity. This is the romantic driving force behind Anna Balicke's lust for the obscenely ignoble Kragler. The bourgeoisie will see it as a triumph of the ideal. I really don't think even these dismal reflections will cause the love story to lose its charm. And anyway, perhaps real sexual pleasure is now only to be got from sexually transmitted diseases. They provide an emotional

marketing opportunity where some degree of vitality is still to be found. One of these sexually transmitted diseases is pregnancy. Murk, finding himself without any anchorage as a result of the woman's indifference (a widespread plague, on a truly biblical scale), simply infects her with a child. He behaves morally: he improves his economic situation by filling a void in her stunted nature. But morality is designed to prevent miscalculations. And the woman behaves immorally. The idea that appeals most strongly to her is the obscenity of having sex with Kragler while pregnant with another man's child.

#### *4. 1918: The Kraglers' revolution*

Where the play did well, it was as a result of the love story and the use of drums backstage. (Although I freely admit that a certain personal liveliness, and a pretty unbridled penchant for putting things in a poetic way, both counted in my favour.) The revolution I used as the setting for the action held no more interest for me than Mount Vesuvius does for a man who wants to boil his stock pot over it. And my stock pot seemed to me to be pretty substantial compared with Vesuvius. I really couldn't help the fact that the play did end up, after all, being a sort of depiction of the first German revolution and especially of this particular sort of revolutionary.

This revolution followed in the wake of a war sparked by a nervous breakdown on the part of the diplomats and ended by another on the part of the military. The bourgeoisie had waged this war with extraordinary vigour. And wars have been waged in the past for sillier reasons than to seize the coal and ore mines of Briey. The famous stabbing in the back of the army by the proletariat, the myth that continued to haunt the fascists and the communists for so long afterwards, would have been perpetrated – if it had actually happened – in an area long since abandoned by the army, which had by then been defeated and was beating a retreat. That was when the Kraglers first began to make their presence felt. They started a revolution because they found that the country some of them hadn't seen for four years had changed. The Kraglers were staunch conservatives. Because the section of the bourgeoisie that knew it was bourgeois had suddenly vacated all the government positions it had previously occupied, the section that did not know (that is, the Social Democrats) found itself in the awkward position of having to fill these posts itself. These people were no more revolutionaries than miners in an unstable mine shaft are mining engineers. The Kraglers' problem was that they now had to become bourgeois. Everybody regarded them as revolutionaries, and on the stage, too, I discovered, Kragler did come across as very revolutionary. Most of all, though, he came across as a proletarian. The military, naturally, had been proletarianized. Their complexion

had worsened. Factories had always resembled barracks, and now it became clear that both had similar effects. For a while the real revolutionaries could commiserate with the play, seeing Kragler as a proletarian and having reason to be thankful for having such proletarians as heroes. They could also be critical of the play, because they saw Kragler as a bourgeois, and be thankful for having a hero such as him. For there was no doubt that Kragler was a hero. Today, however, they would no longer be able to deny that *Drums* is an eminently political play. An object lesson such as one rarely gets. The figure standing before them was that fatal type of Social Democrat, and in his heroic form, moreover. It was difficult to identify him as bourgeois, both on the stage and in real life. The revolution, undeniably, was lost. This was the type who had started it. The most important thing was to learn how to recognize him. He had started it, and now here he was. Here, at the centre of a mundane romantic love story devoid of any particular depth was this Social Democrat, this false proletarian, this fatal revolutionary, who sabotaged the revolution, whom Lenin fought against even more vigorously than he did against the overtly bourgeois, and who eluded even Lenin's grasp so well that before the Russian Revolution he barely succeeded in identifying him to the masses in order to warn them. This, then, was Kragler: this revolutionary who had managed to regain possession of what had once been his by arousing pity, who whined and kicked up a fuss, and who went home once he had got what he had been lacking. As for the proletarians, the play was not shown to them.

[‘Vorwort zu “Trommeln” ’, BFA 24/15-21]

Written in 1926 and intended for publication in a 1927 edition of *Drums in the Night. The Face of the Ruling Class* (1921) was a collection of fifty-five drawings by the Marxist Dadaist George Grosz. Brecht had met Grosz in the mid-1920s and worked with him at Erwin Piscator's theatre in 1927. ‘Nearer, My God, to Thee’ (section 2) was played by the ship's orchestra during the sinking of the *Titanic*. Securing the mineral deposits at Briey in Lorraine was a key aim of the German army in the First World War, while the allegation of a proletarian ‘stab in the back’ – the notion that the unvanquished German army had been betrayed by the perpetrators of the November Revolution who had signed the Armistice – was first made by Hindenburg in a speech on 18 November 1918.

## Shouldn't We Liquidate Aesthetics?

Dear Mr X,



When I asked you to assess the drama from a sociological point of view, I did so because I hoped that sociology would liquidate our current drama. As you immediately realized, I wanted sociology to perform a simple and radical task: to prove that there is no longer any justification for the continued existence of this drama and that there is no future for anything that is based (now or in years to come) on the assumptions that once made great drama possible. As a certain sociologist, of whom I hope we are united in our appreciation, would say: there is no sociological space for this drama any longer. Yours is the only branch of knowledge to enjoy sufficient freedom of thought, all the rest are too interested – and implicated – in perpetuating the general level of civilization of our era.

You have always been immune to the commonly held belief that any drama undertakes to satisfy *eternal* human appetites, when in fact the only eternal appetite it ever attempts to satisfy is that of seeing a drama. You know that other appetites change, and you know why. You, the sociologist, who does not automatically assume that the disappearance of one of humanity's appetites signals its imminent downfall, are the only one prepared to admit that the great Shakespearean dramas that form the basis of our drama don't work any more. These Shakespearean dramas were followed by a period of three hundred years during which the individual evolved into a capitalist, and they will be overpowered not by the consequences of capitalism but by capitalism itself. There is little point in talking about post-Shakespearean drama, because it is invariably much poorer, and in Germany has ended up being thoroughly corrupted by Latin influences. People only continue to support it out of local patriotism.

If we look at things from the sociological perspective we can see that where our literature is concerned we are trapped in a morass. We might somehow be able to get the aesthete to admit the truth of the sociologist's claim – that is, that our existing drama is no good – but we will never be able to rob him of the conviction that this drama can be improved. (The aesthete will happily admit that the only way he can imagine this 'improvement' being brought about is by recourse to the old tricks of the trade, 'better' construction in the old-fashioned sense, 'better' motivation for the spectators who are used to good old-fashioned motivations and so on.) It would seem that we will only have the sociologist on our side if we declare this kind of drama to be beyond repair and call for it to be liquidated. The sociologist knows that there are circumstances in which improvements no longer do any good. His scale of judgements runs not from 'good' to 'bad' but from 'right' to 'wrong'. If a play is 'wrong', he will not praise it on the grounds that it is 'good' (or 'beautiful'), and he alone will remain deaf to the aesthetic appeal of a production that is 'wrong'. He alone knows what

is wrong, he is no relativist, he is interested only in the essentials, he has no fun in being able to prove everything but simply wants to find out the one thing that is worth proving, he by no means takes responsibility for everything, but only for one thing. The sociologist is our man.

The aesthetic point of view does not do justice to the new plays, even where it yields favourable judgements. A quick glance at pretty much every initiative in favour of the new dramatic writing is evidence of this. Even where the critics' instincts pointed them in the right direction, the vocabulary of aesthetics did not allow them to provide much convincing evidence of their positive attitudes, and left them unable to properly inform the public. But the worst thing was that the critics, even as they encouraged theatres to put on these plays, gave no practical guidance whatsoever. So in the end the new plays only ever served the purposes of the old theatre and helped postpone its collapse – the collapse on which their own future in fact depends. The plays currently being produced will be incomprehensible to anyone who is ignorant of the active enmity between this generation and everything that precedes it, but shares the general belief that this generation simply wants its chance to gain admittance and be noticed. This generation does not want to conquer the theatre along with its current audience, to perform better or just more up-to-date plays in this theatre and for this audience; and it has no chance of doing so. Instead it has the chance, and the duty, to conquer the theatre for a *different* audience. The new plays currently being produced – and moving ever closer to that great epic theatre that fits the sociological situation – can be understood (in terms of their content and their form) only by those who understand this situation. These new plays will not pander to the old aesthetics, they will destroy it.

Faithfully yours in this hope,  
Brecht

[‘*Sollten wir nicht die Ästhetik liquidieren?*’, BFA 21/202-4]

First published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 2 June 1927. Mr X was Professor Fritz Sternberg, who had published a ‘Letter to a Dramatist from Mr X’ in the same paper on 12 May 1927; he was also the sociologist referred to in the first paragraph. The public exchange of letters between Brecht and Sternberg was followed up in January 1929 in Brecht’s radio discussion with Sternberg and Ihering, documented in ‘New Dramatic Writing’ (*Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp. 68–4).

## **Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties**

Any theatre that makes a serious attempt to stage one of the newer plays risks being completely transformed. The audience will witness nothing less than a battle between theatre and play, an almost academic exercise in the course of which the only thing the audience has to do – if it takes any interest at all, that is, in the renewal of the theatre – is to work out whether the theatre emerges as winner or loser from this murderous conflict. (Today, in the majority of cases, the theatre can only emerge victorious if it manages to completely avoid the risk of being transformed by the play – and for the time being it almost always succeeds in doing this.) At the moment, the crucial thing is not whether the play affects the audience but whether it affects the theatre.

This will be the case until our theatres have managed to develop the style of production that our plays require and make possible. It won't be enough for the theatres to invent some kind of special theatrical style for our plays, the way they invented the so-called Munich Shakespearean stage (which could only be used for Shakespeare plays). Instead, they will have to find a style that will bring renewed effectiveness to that whole section of the theatrical repertoire that still retains a certain amount of vitality.

It goes without saying that *the complete transformation of the theatre* cannot be dictated by an artistic whim: it must be in line with the total intellectual transformation of our era.

Until now the familiar symptoms of this intellectual transformation have simply been seen as symptoms of disease. There is some justification for this, because naturally the first visible indications of a change are the signs that the *old* system is beginning to decay. But it would be wrong to treat these phenomena – so-called Americanism, for example – as anything other than pathological changes caused by real intellectual influences of an entirely new sort within the aging body of our culture. And it would be wrong too to treat these new ideas as if they were not ideas or *intellectual* phenomena at all, and to try to set the theatre up in opposition to them, as a kind of bastion of the intellect. On the contrary it is precisely theatre, art and literature that must create the 'ideological superstructure' for a real, tangible shift in the way of life of our era.

In its works, the new dramatic writing identifies *epic theatre* as the theatrical style of our time. It is not possible to elaborate the principles of epic theatre in just a few short slogans. Most of these principles still need to be worked out in detail, and relate to the way the actors perform, stagecraft, dramaturgy, stage music, the use of film and so on. The key thing about epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the spectators' emotions than to their reason. The spectator is not supposed to share in the experiences of the characters but to question them,

dispute them. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try to deny the role of emotion in this kind of theatre. That would be like still attempting to deny the role of emotion in science.

[‘*Schwierigkeiten des epischen Theaters*’, BFA 21/209-10]

First published in the literary supplement of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 27 November 1927. The ‘New Munich Shakespeare Stage’ opened in the Munich Hoftheater on 22 March 1909 and performed a series of Shakespearean plays in the 1909–10 season. ‘Ideological superstructure’ is Brecht’s gloss on Marx’s account of base and superstructure in the ‘Preface’ to the *Critique of Political Economy*, where Marx defines the economic structure of society as its real base, which provides the foundation for a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond forms of social consciousness that he defines as ideological. For Brecht’s views on social superstructure towards the end of the Weimar Republic, see ‘Theses on the Theory of Superstructure’ (*Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp. 107–9).

## On New Dramatic Writing

You asked me to set down some ideas about a new kind of dramatic writing. As I sit down to the task, a glance at my subject matter reminds me (to my horror) what ugly vocabulary I am again going to have to resort to. We will have to do without charm, however, since it would be impossible to address the topic of ‘new dramatic writing’ without using political terms – a purely aesthetic vocabulary will not serve our purpose. Proof of this is the striking failure of today’s aesthetically minded critics to talk about the new dramatic writing that already exists.

Such critics, even when they instinctively want to promote the new dramatic writing, immediately get into difficulties when it comes to explaining even its subject matter, at which point – again instinctively – they reject these works, feeling compelled to label them incomprehensible and their authors imbeciles or weaklings. At best, these critics attribute the writing of the new plays to the effect of certain uncontrolled and uncontrollable emotions in young people, just as a certain set of bourgeois writers, charged with precisely this task, deem the really quite astoundingly clear opinions of the proletariat and its leaders to be the product of pure emotion.

It is important to be clear about how German drama has developed over the last generation. The last great wave was around the end of the nineteenth

century. Some dramatists, infected by the great French novel of bourgeois civilization, infected the theatre with Naturalism. Political developments alone had given rise to entirely new subject matter. Photography began to be used. But because it was impossible to achieve three-dimensional effects using photography, people turned to psychology. The little figures were endowed with an unusually interesting inner life. This movement, whose only claim to anything approaching literariness was the fact that the works in question were written by people with literary talent, yielded no works of any significance, cultivated no new themes for the theatre and, after a few attempts, sank without trace: its acolytes themselves revoked their own maxims and spent the rest of their lives setting their aesthetics to rights. Today we are seeing the theatre itself embrace a similar initiative: again we are witnessing the attempt, this time by the theatre, to 'get to the heart of the subject matter', again photography is being used (this time by the theatre), and once again the only claim to any kind of artistic value will be the involvement of artistically gifted individuals.

The truth is that the old form of drama is broken. There is not much point inquiring into the reasons for this, as nobody is really going to want to use it again. The old form of drama – even if it means an entire generation of 'experienced' critics having to relearn their ABCs – is dead, once and for all, and any attempt to revive it is corrupt and will be in vain. All those younger people who are still using it must be ruined, even where they have the theatres to themselves, because they are providing fodder for their lazy and uneducated audiences, they must be ruined by intellectual boycott, and not because their plays are aesthetically weak but because these plays, perhaps for the first time in history and perhaps not, are perpetuating the old, corrupt notions that not only geniuses but all decent people must make it their business to eradicate. (For anyone who may be hard of hearing, let me be explicit and say that this terrorization does not threaten every play that is not directly working towards the political world revolution – such a threat is not necessary – because I want to make clear that we must eliminate even those plays that do work towards the world revolution but still contain old ideas, the very ideas which make such a revolution necessary.)

At the moment, however, the main adversary of the new dramatic writing is not so much the old dramatic writing, which after all just needs to be abandoned, as the existing theatre. The 'existing theatre' should be understood as the actual institutions, whether they are being financed by public money or operating as private commercial enterprises. This may not be understandable straightaway. If we want to understand it, we need to study the attitude of the press. Has anyone else noticed that not for one moment have today's theatre critics ever had the

option of treating dramatic writing as separate from the theatre (the actual institutions and so on)? From the very beginning they analysed this dramatic writing *as if they were merely agents of the theatre*, with the sole aim of deciding whether or not it could act as a new stand-by for the existing theatres – particularly for those indescribably vice-ridden trading houses that had, right from the word go, been drawn into the inexorable intellectual decline of the ruling class. Any play that gave this theatre a chance was seen as desirable, and this was the only aspect about any play ever to be highlighted. Even today, in every newspaper article on the subject of theatre, a new generation is systematically encouraged or coaxed or threatened into taking seriously these old amusement halls, tainted by the most squalid of ideas.

You can sift through whole reams of reviews without noting any of them expressing the suspicion that some of the newer plays might have been staged wrongly by the theatres – that they might have been used, that is, to pursue a different goal from the one they had aspired to (and that they might have achieved). The only explanation for this intriguing fact is that the press and the theatre, as two major industries – owners of the means of production, in other words – present a united front against producers and are, inevitably, only interested in exploiting them (and even more interested in exploiting their means of production). Even someone who is neither financially nor ideologically implicated in either of these two industries will find it difficult to form the suspicion that theatres might be staging the new dramatic writing in entirely the wrong way, and this is due to a remarkable fact that might not automatically spring to mind in connection with these things – the fact that *even the new plays work in the theatre*. When they are staged in the old way and for the old purpose, they work. In the absence of a new theatrical style, one suited to our age, the theatres have found ways of staging absolutely anything. They adopt every possible kind of style, while always taking care to bring out some topical effects. It is possible to ‘tease out’ Aeschylus, Kalidasa, Molière etc., as well as plays of the new dramatic writing, in a highly effective manner.

Naturally it is not in the power of individual stage managers or directors, however talented they may be, to bring about a real transformation. They are not in any way responsible for the catastrophic decline evident in the theatre (and even more evident elsewhere, in fact). Messrs Rockefeller and Ford cannot choose whether or not to prevent capitalism from ravaging every inch of the intellectual landscape. Whether they themselves would be able to change is debatable. But one thing is certain: they cannot change capitalism. Mr Rockefeller may have created Standard Oil, but he cannot convert it into a not-

for-profit organization without bringing about its ruin: simply put, it *cannot* be converted into anything else. The call for a new theatre is the call for a new social order. The best of today's stage managers can do something to help: they can keep trying to devise *exceptions*, keep trying, in other words, to make intellectual activity in the theatre possible in *exceptional* cases.

What these things have to do with new dramatic writing may be unclear to those who can conceive of such new dramatic writing in the absence of a new theatrical style, or who believe that a new theatrical style (and not just a slight variation on the old one) could only be implemented with the help of dramatic writing. But we need to analyse these things and these relationships, if only to make sure people don't think they have seen anything of the new dramatic writing yet (if they have seen new dramas put on at the theatre.)

It is pointless postulating into a vacuum tenets of a dramatic writing that, for the reasons mentioned above, cannot very well be made apparent, so I will confine myself to giving just a rough idea of what can no longer be achieved using the old form of drama but which a new theatre, even if this would cause it to fulfil a different purpose altogether, would need to be able to accomplish.

The old form of drama does not allow us to portray the world as we see it today.

Our current dramatic form does not enable us to depict what we now perceive to be the typical course of a human being's destiny.

As you read this, we are living in the year 1928, not just at some point in time between 1600 and 2000, and so once again I have to resort to that ugly vocabulary that is not yours but is not only mine either: the fate of Rose Bernd, the weavers and so on can no longer be perceived as tragic and thus cannot be passed off as tragic in an age that ascribes these catastrophes to a mere lack of civilization and that has already worked out plenty of eminently practical suggestions as to how to remedy this lack. The extent of the depredation that such plays give rise to, or that gives rise to such plays, is illustrated by the fact that some people today believe humanity is well on the way to getting rid of the tragic entirely, merely by taking civilizing measures. *Which* tragedy? Rose Bernd's? Undoubtedly.

The form of such dramas is that of the anecdote.

The anecdotal form always seems to work well when there is a real consensus between the storyteller and the listener – or listeners, if there are several of them. Then the anecdote, as it is so prettily called, illuminates a situation like a flash of lightning (and this situation then seems familiar to everyone.) I imagine that such a consensus existed in the case of French drama, as it had its roots in a society with obligatory and accepted conventions. I don't know if it existed in

Elizabethan England, but there you had those great passions that would have overridden any difference of opinion and were understood by everybody, even when – or especially when – they flew in the face of all convention. It was passion that gave Shakespeare's anecdotes their totality.

[‘Über eine neue Dramatik’, BFA 21/234-9]

Written in 1928. This is one of several essays in which Brecht discusses new dramatic writing (see also ‘New Dramatic Writing’ in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp. 64–74). Kalidasa was a classical Indian dramatist, while *Rosa Bernd* and *The Weavers* are Naturalist dramas written by Gerhart Hauptmann.

### Latest Stage: Oedipus

1. In recent years it has been the Germans – the philosophy experts – who have taken the lead in the development of major drama and major theatre. The future of the theatre is a philosophical one.
2. This development does not proceed in a straight line but partly dialectically, by way of oppositions, and partly in parallel, but either way it is so rapid that it can pass through several stages in the space of just one year. The latest of these stages seems to be *Oedipus*.
3. This season shows evidence of Piscator's influence. From the theatre's point of view, Piscator has called attention not, as was commonly assumed, to the question of form (theatrical technique) so much as to the question of subject matter. And he has had a widespread impact. Middle-grade theatres have turned eagerly to new subjects (*Criminals, Revolt, The Hand of the Potter*). There have been two exceptions: *The Threepenny Opera* and *Oedipus*. Both of these broached the question of form.
4. The theatre's efforts in relation to its new subject matter were not very felicitous; with Piscator gone, there was no productive force behind them (with the exception of *Revolt*, a posthumous studio production of Piscator's). The most significant advance of the year was the attempt to master the major form. Latest stage: *Oedipus*.
5. Concern with subject matter and concern with form complement one another. From the theatre's point of view, progress in theatrical technique is only progress when it contributes to the exploitation of subject matter, ‘progress in dramatic technique is only progress when it contributes to the exploitation of subject matter’.
6. A word on major forms. The major modern subjects must be viewed through



the lens of mime – they must have a gestic character. They must be organized according to relationships between people or groups of people. But the traditional major form – the dramatic form – is not suitable for contemporary subject matter. To put it bluntly, for those in the business: today’s subject matter cannot be expressed in the old ‘major’ form.

7. The major form is designed to exploit subject matter in a way that will resonate for ‘eternity’. ‘Typicality’ can also be found on the temporal plane. Those who use the major form narrate their subject matter to future generations just as clearly as they narrate it to their own, if not more so.

8. Our dramatic form is based on the principle that the spectators get swept along by what is happening on stage, that they identify with it and can understand it. To put it bluntly, for those in the business: a play that is set in a corn exchange, say, cannot be done in the major form (the dramatic one). *We find it difficult to imagine a time and adopt an attitude in which similar conditions are not natural, and those who come after us will be astonished by these unnatural and incomprehensible conditions. So what should our major form be like?*

9. Epic. It must report. It does not need to believe that one can understand our world through empathy, and it does not need to intend this either. The subject matter is vast, our dramatic writing must take this into account.

10. A word on the latest stage: *Oedipus*. Important aspects: 1. The major form. 2. The techniques in the second half (*Oedipus at Colonus*), where a story is told with great theatrical effect. Here, words, which till now have been notorious for being lyrical, become theatrically effective. Here the ‘experience’, if it comes from anywhere, comes from the philosophical realm.

[‘*Letzte Etappe: Oedipus*’, BFA 21/278-9]

First published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 1 February 1929. Brecht is referring to Leopold Jessner’s production of *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* at the Berlin Staatstheater on 4 January 1929. The actors included Fritz Kortner (Oedipus), Lotte Lenya (Ismene) and Helene Weigel (Maid or Second Messenger). Brecht also refers to several contemporary plays performed in Berlin in 1928: *The Criminals* by Ferdinand Bruckner, *Revolt in the House of Correction* by P. M. Lampel and *The Hand of the Potter* by Theodore Dreiser. *The Threepenny Opera* had been playing continuously at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm since its premiere on 31 August 1928. Brecht describes the production of *Revolt in the House of Correction* as ‘posthumous’ because Piscator’s Studio Theatre had closed.

## Dialogue on Acting

The actors in your plays always enjoy great success. Are you yourself satisfied with them?

No.

Because they act badly?

No. Because they act wrongly.

So how should they act?

For an audience of the scientific age.

What does that mean?

They should demonstrate their knowledge.

Their knowledge of what?

Of human relationships. Human attitudes. Human capacities.

Right, so they should have that knowledge. But how should they demonstrate it?

By consciously presenting. Depicting.

How do they do it at the moment?

They use hypnosis. They put themselves and the audience into a trance.

Give an example!

Suppose they have to depict a leave-taking. What do they do? They put themselves in a leave-taking mood. They want to induce a leave-taking mood in the audience. If the séance is successful, it ends up with nobody learning anything, with the audience ceasing to see anything at all. At best, everybody recollects; everybody feels, in short.

What you're describing sounds like an almost erotic process. But what should it actually be like?

Spiritual. Ceremonial. Ritualistic. Spectator and actor should not come close to each other but should distance themselves from each other. And each should be distanced from him-or herself. Otherwise the element of shock necessary for recognition is lacking.

Just now you used the expression 'scientific'. You mean that when people observe an amoeba, it doesn't suddenly become their best friend. They can't empathize with it. Yet the scientific people attempt to understand it. Do they at least succeed in that, in the end?

I don't know. They want to make some connection between it and the other things they have seen.

So should the actors not try to make the person they are portraying understandable?

Not so much the person as the processes, perhaps. What I mean is: when I go

and see Richard III, I don't want to feel that I am Richard III, but to perceive this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility.

Should we be seeing science in the theatre then?

No. Theatre.

I see: the scientific types have their theatre like everybody else.

Yes. But the theatre now has scientific types as spectators yet doesn't address itself to them. Because these spectators leave their reason in the cloakroom along with their coats.

Can you not just tell the actors how they should perform?

No. At present they are completely dependent on the spectators, blindly subject to them.

Haven't you ever tried?

Yes. Countless times.

Could they do it?

Sometimes, yes; the ones who were talented and still naive, and still found it fun, but even then only at rehearsals and only as long as I was present and nobody else, in other words, as long as they were performing for the type of spectator that I was telling you about just now. The closer it got to the first public performance, the more the actors steered away, they became visibly different; they were probably anticipating the arrival of those other spectators with whom this sort of acting might not have gone down so well.

Do you think it really would have gone down badly?

I fear so. It would have been a big risk, at any rate.

Couldn't it happen gradually?

No. If it happened gradually it wouldn't seem to the spectator that something new was gradually emerging but that something old was gradually dying. And the spectator would gradually stop coming to the theatre. Because if the new element was introduced gradually it would only be half introduced and so it would have no force and no effect. Because this is not a matter of qualitative improvement but of adopting an entirely different purpose, not a matter of the theatre continuing to fulfil exactly the same purpose only better, but fulfilling a new purpose – possibly not very well at first, but so what? What would be the effect of attempting to smuggle something in gradually? The actor in question would merely be declared 'striking'. It wouldn't be his acting that would strike people, however, but he himself. He would become 'obtrusive'. And yet obtrusiveness is one of the hallmarks of the new kind of acting. Alternatively, the actor might find himself accused of being too self-conscious, and self-consciousness is another hallmark of this new acting style.

Have attempts of this kind been made?

Yes, one or two.

Give an example!

When an actress of this new sort was playing the servant in *Oedipus*, she announced the death of her mistress by proclaiming ‘dead, dead’ in a completely emotionless, piercing voice, her cry of ‘Jocasta is dead’ was devoid of any sorrow, but pronounced so firmly and inexorably that the bare fact of her mistress’s death created a more powerful impression at that precise moment than could have been generated by any grief of her own. Horror did not conquer her voice, then, although it did her face – she used white make-up to signify the impact a death makes on those who witness it. In her report of how the suicidal woman had collapsed as if before a slave-driver, there was not so much pity for the woman as there was a sense of the slave-driver’s triumph, so that even the most sentimental spectators could not fail to realize that a decision had just been made that called for their consent. She described with astonishment, in a single lucid sentence, the dying woman’s ravings and apparent irrationality, and through the unambiguous tone of her ‘And how she ended we do not know’, she signalled her refusal to give any further information about the death – a meagre yet unshakable tribute. But she descended the few steps from the stage with such long strides that her slight figure seemed to cover an immense distance between the empty scene of the tragedy and the people below stage. And as she raised her arms in mechanical lamentation, she asked at the same time for pity for herself, the one who had witnessed the catastrophe, and with her loud ‘now you may lament’ she seemed to deny the validity of any previous, less well-founded regrets.

What sort of a reception did she get?

A pretty modest one, from everyone except a few connoisseurs. Wrapped up in empathizing with the characters’ emotions, hardly anyone had participated in the intellectual decisions that make up the action. That terrible decision she had communicated had almost no effect on those people who saw it merely as an opportunity for new emotions.

[‘*Dialog über Schauspielkunst*’, BFA 21/279-82]

First published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 17 February 1929. The actress Brecht refers to is Helene Weigel, in her role in Jessner’s production of *Oedipus* (see the previous essay, ‘Latest Stage: Oedipus’). The use of white make-up to signify powerful emotions was an important feature in Brecht’s own theatre: it was used in the 1924 production of *Life of Edward II of England* and the 1931 production of *Man Equals Man* (see below,

‘Notes on the Comedy *Man Equals Man*’). The term ‘slave-driver’ renders Brecht’s *Treiber*, which is presumably taken from the version of *Oedipus the King* (ll.1234–45) used in Jessner’s production and seems to correspond to the notion that Jocasta was ‘whipped’ into a rage.

## On Subject Matter and Form

1. You cannot overcome difficulties by keeping them quiet. In practice you need to proceed step by step – theory must encompass the whole journey. The first leg of the journey is the new subject matter, but there are many stages to pass through afterwards. The problem is that it is difficult to do the work necessary for the first stage (the new subject matter) if you have already started thinking about the second (the new relationships between people). Explaining the function of helium does not get you very far in establishing a comprehensive world-picture; yet it will be impossible to explain the function of helium if you have anything other than (or more than) helium in mind. The usual route to an exploration of people’s new relationships with each other is via an exploration of the new subject matter (marriage, disease, money, war, etc.)

2. The first thing to do, then, is to identify the new subject matter, and the second is to map out the new relationships. Why? Because art follows reality. Here is an example: the extraction and use of petroleum represents a new thematic complex within which, upon closer inspection, entirely new kinds of human relationships become apparent. Both the individual and the masses display certain modes of action, which are clearly specific to the petroleum complex. But the new modes of action were not what created this particular way of utilizing petroleum. On the contrary, the petroleum complex came first, and the new relationships are secondary. The new relationships represent the answers people give, the solutions they find, to questions of ‘subject matter’. The subject matter (the situation, as it were) develops according to definite rules and simple necessities, but petroleum creates new relationships. These, as I have said, are secondary.

3. In order to embrace the new subject matter, a new dramatic and theatrical form is needed. Can we talk about money in iambs? ‘The Mark, which was worth fifty dollars yesterday, is now over a hundred, and may rise’, etc. – does that work? Petroleum balks at the five-act form, today’s catastrophes do not proceed in a straight line but in cyclical crises, the ‘heroes’ are different according to the different phases, are interchangeable, etc., the graph of human actions is complicated by human *error*, fate is no longer a coherent power, instead we find force fields with opposing currents, and the power blocks

themselves show movement not only against one another but within themselves, etc., etc. The dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen is nowhere near adequate even to dramatizing a simple newspaper report. This is not a boast but a sad statement of fact. It is impossible to elucidate contemporary characters and contemporary actions using the traits and the motives that would have been adequate in our fathers' day. We have made things easier for ourselves (provisionally) by not exploring motives at all (see *In the Jungle of Cities* and *East Pole Train*) so as to at least avoid imputing false ones, and we have portrayed actions as pure phenomena, we will probably have to portray characters without any traits for a while, again provisionally.

4. Of course, all these questions only pertain to serious attempts to write *great* drama, the kind of drama that we do not currently distinguish anywhere near carefully enough from mediocre plays created solely for the purposes of entertainment.

5. Once we have more or less found our bearings in relation to the subject matter, we can move on to the relationships, which at present are immensely complicated and can only be simplified through *form*. The form in question can only be attained, however, by way of a complete modification of the purpose of art. Only a new purpose can lead to a new art. This new purpose is called pedagogy.

[*Über Stoffe und Formen*, BFA 21/302-4]

First published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 31 March 1929. Brecht's was one of several essays by contemporary playwrights and directors published in this issue of the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* on the theme of 'The Theatre of Tomorrow'. The references to petroleum relate to Leo Lania's comedy *Boom*, which Brecht helped to adapt for Piscator's company in the spring of 1928, and to Lion Feuchtwanger's 1927 play *The Petroleum Islands*, produced at the Staatstheater on 28 November 1928 with Lotte Lenya in the cast. Brecht also refers to his own play *In the Jungle*, written in 1923, and Arnolt Bronnen's *East Pole Train*, which had been produced by Jessner at the Berlin Staatstheater on 29 January 1926.

## On Rehearsing

One of the things that make rehearsing difficult in our theatres is the fact that rehearsals take place under artificial light. Theatres, churches and beer cellars are all windowless buildings. Daylight, because of its sobering effect, is always preferable to artificial light. But some people maintain that the same type of

lighting should be used in the preparation of a production as in its performance: artificial lighting, in other words, given that performances always take place in the evening. Those who subscribe to this view must not use dimmer lighting for rehearsals than for actual performances just to cut costs. And even if a theatre can provide artificial light at full brightness during rehearsals, it is still better to rehearse in rooms if that theatre does not have any windows.

Rehearsals are almost always about the director trying out different ways of realizing his overall vision for the actors. At reading rehearsals, the actors acquire only a very limited knowledge of the play. The script excerpts for their individual parts only include the cues for their own lines. Their ignorance of the overall progress of the action could be put to good use: the singularity of each character in each of his or her lines or actions, contrasted with the general action of all of the characters together, could enrich this general action. But the director's 'vision' will not allow for this. He himself does not actually rehearse different ideas because he comes to the rehearsal process with a fixed idea of how it should go. I have very rarely seen a performance developed line by line and movement by movement in a sober, critical way.

If the actors, having acquired a more complete knowledge of the play and a clearer idea of its social purpose, were allowed to rehearse not only their own parts but also those of their fellow actors, the performance as a whole could be improved enormously. Both the scene and the individual actors appearing in it would benefit if the actors were productively involved in each other's roles. Some theatres have tried to foster an 'ensemble spirit'. What this usually boils down to is that all the actors are expected to sacrifice their own egoism 'for the good of the play'. It is actually much better to mobilize this egoism in each and every actor. In the case of the play in question it would be a good idea for the director to ask the actors, when they are rehearsing the first scene, to experiment with the following scenario: two statesmen, over newspapers and a game of billiards, make a decisive political decision. Directors would do well to leave the placing of the table *etc.* up to the actors and to limit themselves as far as possible to constructive criticism.

[*Über die Probenarbeit*, BFA 21/387-8]

Written in c. 1930.

## **Dialectical Dramatic Writing**

*What is dialectics?*

It is customary nowadays to take the view – as almost all professional critics of theatre and drama do – that a naïve attitude should be adopted in the theatre, and people seem to be convinced that this is possible. If the theatre does its job properly, then all the audience has to do is turn up. (And since the critics get paid for it, they always turn up.) From the point of view of the new kind of theatre there would be little to object to in the idea of the spectator having a naïve attitude, if such an attitude were possible. I shall argue here that it is impossible and explain why this is the case. But if it is impossible, then the spectator will be required to tread the (less comfortable) path of learning something before turning up at the theatre. Spectators will have to be ‘in the know’, to be prepared, to be ‘educated’ – though this preparation in itself is difficult enough. So ‘dialectics’ will have to be discussed here without any explanation of what it is; since dialectics features not only in proletarian but also in bourgeois education (in its idealist form at least), I am going to be cruel and assume prior knowledge of it.<sup>1</sup>

What follows, moreover, is less a detailed explanation of the dialectical nature of the new dramatic writing (although this issue will also be raised, since it has never been properly emphasized until now), and less an illustration of the dialectics of its development (which would be a task for real literary criticism), and more a primitive attempt to demonstrate the revolutionary impact that dialectics exerts wherever it is found, and its role as the best possible gravedigger for bourgeois ideas and institutions.

The importance of proving this point justifies several pages of *serious* discussion of a domain that does not otherwise call for such discussion – and indeed hardly even warrants it, in and of itself – the domain of dramatic theatre.

And thus on the one hand we have dramatic production that by its very nature affects the concrete theatre of stage, auditorium and human being in the most powerful way, in that it needs to completely revolutionize this theatre along with its spectators (this sort of need is the most urgent kind there is), and on the other hand we have a theatre that demands only commodities, raw material that can be turned back into commodities by the *apparatus in its current state*. On the one hand we have a type of production that, by no means lacking in tradition, has now accumulated enough quantitative improvements to be able to attempt a decisive qualitative improvement of the whole, and which has followed (or accommodated) the continual but now increasingly rapid revolutions in the social and political substructure energetically enough to now be able to reap the *consequences*. On the other hand we have a load of entertainment promoters locked in a battle with works that have uncomfortable consequences but that



exist solely to bring about these consequences, works that require an explanation but that are completely inexplicable, at any rate to those who try to tackle them using an outdated idealism never employed anywhere else, whose rigour is exactly what is called for. When these theatres anticipate the new, what they are actually anticipating (on whose instructions?) is a variant of the old – they expect to hand over their apparatus to be exploited. They are opposed to something new whose (discarded) variant is their old one. They anticipate a new drama because their old one suits them as little as its ideology does their praxis. And because the old drama, whose ‘renewal’ they are calling for, was a bourgeois one, and because they are bourgeois, they expect the new drama to be bourgeois too. But the haute bourgeoisie, who produced the great bourgeois drama, did not write it for the petty bourgeoisie that they created, and there will be no new bourgeois drama from now on. The thing we have labelled dialectical dramatic writing is unquestionably only a half-way house, utterly imperfect because it is dependent upon its concretization yet cannot attain it, and far from complete because it is occupied with its other half, its completion. It is *also* bourgeois (and not in any way ‘proletarian’), certainly in terms of its origin and also perhaps its subject matter, but not in terms of its purpose and usability. In a bourgeois social order it will have as little significance as the applications of the great materialist dialectic to physics, history, physiology and economics.

A crude and shallow realism, which never revealed any deeper contexts and which was therefore at its most excruciating when it aimed at tragic effects, because it was not (as it believed) portraying nature, which is an eternal and immutable human category.

This style was termed Naturalism, because it portrayed human nature naturally, that is to say, directly, just the way it was (phonetically). The ‘human’ factor played an important role here<sup>2</sup>: it ‘unified’ everyone (this sort of unification was all that was necessary). And the idea of ‘milieu as fate’ inspired compassion; the emotion that ‘one’ feels when one cannot do anything to help but does at least suffer vicariously. Milieu was treated as a natural phenomenon, immutable and inescapable.

Nevertheless, it was at this point that an important stage was reached in the progression of the soon-to-be-liquidated new drama: namely the breakdown of the *dramatic* form of drama. This came about partly because the playwrights were influenced by the great French novels of bourgeois civilization, but mainly because, quite simply, reality itself took over.

In order to make reality talk, an epic form was needed, and this immediately resulted in the accusation that the playwrights were not real playwrights but

closet novelists. It could be said that realistic subjects disappeared again<sup>3</sup> along with the 'undramatic' form, or vice versa: the playwrights liquidated their experiments before the movement (whose only claim to anything approaching literariness was the fact that the works in question were written by people with literary talent) had managed to generate any works of significance or cultivate any new subject matter for the theatre. Its acolytes themselves revoked their own maxims and spent the rest of their lives setting their aesthetics to rights. But along with the 'dramatic' form, the concept of the individual as being at the centre was also beginning to unravel. Because artists, partly influenced by bourgeois Impressionist painting, had treated 'natural objects' undialectically, not seeing them as being in flux and capable of independent action but as parts of 'Nature', as dead things, they had channelled the vitality into the atmosphere, into the effect 'between' the (base) words. This meant that instead of knowledge they had conveyed – 'experiences', in such a way that 'Nature' became an object of enjoyment (and this then gave rise to the utterly bourgeois *culinary criticism* of Alfred Kerr and his ilk) and in a sense they ended up with a crude cannibalistic drama!<sup>4</sup> To invigorate photography (since it did not allow for three-dimensional effects), to make it 'breathe' and to imbue it with values, people turned to psychology. The little figures on stage were endowed with an unusually interesting inner life. That which had been indivisible – the individual – disintegrated into its component parts, and this produced the *psychology* that examined the parts but naturally failed to put them back together again to make an individual. Thus the individual disintegrated along with 'dramatic' form.

To sum up: Naturalist drama borrowed from the French novel both its subject matter and the epic form. The latter (the weakest aspect of Naturalist drama!) was taken up by recent dramatic writing without the subject matter, as a purely formal principle. Along with this epic mode of representation it adopted the didactic element already present in Naturalist drama, a drama of experience, but it did not really make a feature of this element until it came to apply the epic form to reality (following a series of purely constructivist experiments in a vacuum), at which point it discovered the dialectic of reality and became conscious of its own dialectic. These experiments *in vacuo* were more than just a diversion, however. They had led to the discovery of the importance of gestic principles. For them, the gestic aspect was in fact the dialectical dimension located in the dramatic/theatrical domain.

This is only a sketch, of course – it puts the ideological process in context, but does not take any account of the fact that new formulations obviously don't just

emerge from old ones (through the recognition of past mistakes, for example) – they do not arise, in other words, in the absence of new, ‘external’ (i.e. political and economic) factors!

This was the point at which the post-war generation took up the task again. They began by introducing the dialectical point of view.

Reality was affirmed, and now dialectics really set in. If reality was affirmed, then its tendencies had to be affirmed as well. But the affirmation of its tendencies involved the rejection of its current form. If the war was affirmed, then the world revolution could not be rejected. If the first was a necessity, it was only because of the second. If imperialistic capitalism was rehearsing, on a vast scale, the bringing-together of mighty collectives, then this was surely a dress rehearsal for the world revolution! If capitalism was initiating a mass migration in one spot, this must signify the great vertical migration of the final class struggle!

The war shows the role that the individual was destined to play from then on. The individual as such exercised active influence only as the representative of many. But the individual’s intervention in major economic and political processes was limited to the exploitation of them. The ‘mass of individuals’, however, lost its indivisibility due to its assignability. Individuals were continually assigned roles, and this signalled the beginning of a process that did not target the individual at all, that was not affected by his intervention, and that did not cease to exist when he did.

The material abundance of the age, its enormous technological advances, the powerful actions of the big money-men, even the world war as a vast ‘battle of equipment’, but above all the extent to which the individual was exposed to opportunity and risk – an awareness of these things formed the pillars of this youthful dramatic writing, which was wholly idealist and wholly capitalist. The world was to be presented and acknowledged as it is, its own ruthlessness ruthlessly shown to be its great strength: its god was to be ‘the god of things as they are’. This attempt to create a new ideology directly linked to facts was directed against the bourgeoisie, whose way of thinking (recognized as small-minded) seemed to be in complete contradiction to its way of acting (thought to be great). This greatness of the age in the physical sphere was mirrored in the moral sphere, in the enormity of the ruling class’s crimes and no less in the tremendous efforts of the ruled to put an end to those crimes. And in the course of all this, injustice had vanished entirely from the *field of vision*. In order to conceal the gulf between the classes – like a gulf between a mountain and a plain

– this gulf had been filled in, but with earth taken from the plain, so that the gulf had now vanished but the plain had sunk dramatically, forming a sharp slope, and thus making the mountain even higher. In the realm of cognition an unprecedented permissiveness seemed to prevail. Anyone could adopt any viewpoint they liked. But the view from one viewpoint was no better than another – viewpoint. How were people to comprehend the fact that everything – absolutely everything – had become a commodity? Even concepts had become commodities. Language had an extensive role to play, but it was no longer fit for anything other than being abused. The world was expressible only in the abstract, formulaic writing style of economics – an inaccessible jargon that combined the style of the most incomprehensible of the great German philosophers with that of the great English political economists. The proletariat, a social class seemingly completely excluded from the intellectual life of the age, made use of this jargon, and this fact alone meant that their perspective was the only one uncorrupted by bribery (since no money came their way, either to ensure basic survival or in the form of bribes), hidden from members of other classes. Where this problem was concerned, the issue was simply a generational one.

It was necessary to prove the rationality of the real. Thus a very peculiar reality emerged thanks to this dramatic writing. On the one hand, it was conscious of its primarily historical duty. It saw a great epoch and great figures and it documented them. At the same time it saw everything in flux (‘That’s how we built the long houses of the island of Manhattan ...’). Baal and Alexander from *East Pole Train* were viewed historically. In other words, not only was Baal himself represented as a historical personality in his transformations, his ‘consumption’ and his ‘production’, and above all in his effects on the people he encountered – even his literary existence as a specific intellectual phenomenon was taken as historical fact. The ‘examination’ of Baal was historical, had causes and consequences. What he did and said was evidence about him, against him, his thinking and his being seemed to be identical, and his career was constructed for the stage in such a way that the interest he provided inevitably lessened along with the interest he aroused in his fellow characters on the stage. (At the Berlin production, the painter Neher said: ‘I’m not going to go to too much trouble for the final scenes. The lad can’t summon up much interest by then, the state he’s in. A few boards will do the trick.’ And he was absolutely right. And for the beginning of the play he placed a few large panels on the stage, on to which he had painted the characters Baal would come into contact with during the play – ‘the victims’ – and said: ‘There, let’s see how he gets on with them.’ This was the kingdom of the god of things as they are.)

But the reality that resulted was only a very incomplete representation of external reality. The real incidents were just tenuous hints at intellectual processes. Between bare stage boards that supplied only the components of what was to be represented. In the scene ‘In the years from 19 ... to 19 ... we find ...’, Neher’s set consisted of a childlike map – actually just a representation of a map, since it didn’t depict any specific area – and wind from a wind machine.

There was a primitive representation of human ‘curves’, and when real incidents were attempted, they were no more than visual aids (prompts). There were, however, a lot of texts to read. It was the same in *East Pole Train* – here too, a few insubstantial bourgeois incidents were supposed to facilitate actions and utterances in the grand style. *In the Jungle*, likewise, features certain relationships between individuals, abstracted from their real-life contexts and endowed with more relevant plots – plots that make clear their nature as *laws*. (Shlink’s yellowness) ... but Neher painted boards with India ink to show a large number of ‘historical incidents’, in which Shlink ...

We must not forget, incidentally, that at the moment when the theatre became once more a place for reflection, and a rebellious one at that, the sickeningly solemn atmosphere that Naturalism and Expressionism had produced in the theatre quickly began to rot away, and a certain gaiety and unruliness, if you like, began to set in – partly based on the insight that the theatre’s role in the domain of thought was not the serious one that it liked to claim.

Dialectical dramatic writing began by experimenting mainly with form rather than with subject matter. It worked without psychology, without the individual, and, in a markedly epic manner, it broke down *conditions* into *processes*. The major character types, who were made to seem as strange as possible, and portrayed as objectively as possible (not in such a way that people would be able to empathize with them), were to be depicted by means of their behaviour towards other character types. Their actions were portrayed not as being just a matter of course but as conspicuous – this was to make sure that the main focus of people’s attention was the connections between the actions, and the processes within particular groups. An almost scientific, interested, self-disciplined attitude was expected of the spectator (*facilitated*, the dramatists believed). Consequently, it became this movement’s goal to change the entire theatre, including the spectator. It demanded nothing less than a *change in the theatre’s function* as a social institution.

It is important to understand that these were still only *technical advances* and certainly did not represent any kind of political campaign. Everything – subject matter included – remained within the bourgeois realm. The typical behaviour of

the people of this era was to be subjected, in an entirely objective manner, to the new methods of observation; for the time being this was to take place entirely within the existing social order, which was to be taken absolutely as a given and not discussed further. The new dramatic writing merely set itself the task of tracing the 'curves of human destiny'. The old (dramatic) drama did not allow for a representation of the world as many see it today. What many see as the typical course of a human life, for example, or a typical incident between people, could not be depicted by the form of drama that had existed until that point. The new dramatic writing arrived at the epic form (helped on its way, incidentally, by the works of another novelist, Döblin). Because it saw 'everything in flux', it emphasized the *documentary nature* of this mode of representation. The idea was for the spectator to be able to enter the theatre with the same attitude as he was used to adopting for other activities popular at the time. This attitude was, as mentioned earlier, a kind of scientific attitude. In planetariums and in sports arenas people adopted the same attitude of calmly observing, weighing up and checking that gave rise to the discoveries and inventions of our technological experts and scientists. Except that in the theatre it was the fates of human beings and their behaviour that were offered up for observation. Modern spectators, it was assumed, do not want to meekly succumb to a kind of hypnotic suggestion or to forfeit their reason by getting sucked into all sorts of emotional states. They do not want to be dictated to and violated – they just want to be presented with human material, and to be allowed *to organize it themselves*. For this reason they also like to see human beings in situations that are not clear from the outset, and for the same reason they do not need logical reasoning or psychological motivations like those of the old theatre. Of course, a person who has nothing of the scientist about him and is only out to enjoy himself will think these plays unclear because they embody the lack of clarity inherent in human relationships. In our time human relationships are unclear. So the theatre must find a form that can depict this lack of clarity in the most classical form possible – with epic composure, in other words.

### ***The theatre as a public concern***

#### *Changing the function of the theatre*

The entire theatre must be transformed, not just the text or the actors or even the whole performance – the spectators are involved too, their attitude must be changed.

This change in the attitude of the spectator corresponds to the portrayal of

human attitudes on the stage; the breaking down of the theatrical material into *relationships*. The individual ceases to be at the centre. The individual does not give rise to relationships – groups emerge, within which or towards which the individual adopts certain attitudes, and these are studied by the spectator: *the spectator en masse*, that is. So the individual also ceases to exist as a spectator and is no longer at the centre, no longer a private person who ‘goes along to’ an event put on by theatre practitioners, who gets performed to, who simply enjoys the theatre’s output. Individuals are not just consumers any more – they have to produce. The event is only a half-event without them as participants (if it were whole, *then* it would be incomplete), the spectators, involved in the theatrical event, are theatricalized. So less happens ‘within them’ than ‘with them’, and this means that all the contemporary theatre has done – in its role as a business profiting from the sale of evening entertainment – is to build up a purchasing collective, thereby achieving only quantitative outcomes. One more step – *and this step must be one that attacks the fundamental nature of the business* – and we would see a qualitative change in this collective: it would no longer be accidental. Now we may demand that *the spectator (en masse) be literarized*, that is that spectators should be specially educated, instructed, for the purposes of a ‘trip’ to the theatre! It is not possible for just anyone wandering in off the street, simply by virtue of having paid for a ticket, to ‘understand’ this kind of theatre in the sense of ‘consuming’ it, it is no longer a commodity readily available to everyone on the basis of his or her general sensual disposition. Subject matter is declared common property, it is ‘nationalized’, a prerequisite for study, and formal principles – as the means of putting the subject matter to use – are also a crucial aspect of the spectator’s work (and study). This explains why *adaptations of existing subject matter* make the work that needs doing a lot easier. This is due to the fact that the current phase contains almost all the previous elements that have emphatically characterized these phases. This could make the current phase seem merely eclectic to anyone who extrapolates the new phase from the old, instead of the old from the new – this is because they are not taking into consideration the decisive factor of the change in function (which actually necessitates a certain selection of new thoughts.) Here, by emphasizing the *gestic content* of familiar subject matter, the attitudes in question can be correctly posited (for producers and users) *against* the subject matter. Now it is clear that *this* function of the theatre is dependent upon an almost total commonality in all the vital interests of all those involved. It is precisely the undisputed priority of the theatre over dramatic literature – a technically revolutionary step forward – signifying, as it does, the priority of the means of production over actual production (an understanding of revolutionary economics

is essential here) that presents one of the main obstacles to the major change in function that it makes possible.

Called upon to adopt not a passive, weak-willed attitude (as though enchanted or hypnotized) but a critical one, the listeners immediately adopted a specific *political* attitude, not a general, collective one that was *above* interests, as the new dramatic writing would have liked. Now, indeed, the performance itself suddenly seemed not to have been just the bright idea of a few dramatists, but to correspond to the unspoken dictates of the general public. If such a change in the function of the theatre once again seemed possible, even if it was not what this dramatic writing had in mind, it was in fact rendered all the more impossible by the unforeseen nature of its possibility. The theatre, itself an object, became an object blocking a change in function.

A change in the theatre's function was impossible.

### ***The theatre as a means of production***

Bourgeois theatre – mainly by creating a huge customer base among the public through the enforced, continuous expansion of the market and through the resulting destruction of those salon cliques that had previously controlled the theatre – had created the technical preconditions for a complete change in the theatre's function.

Its class nature prevents it from reaping the consequences, just as it has long espoused, in practice, an absolute atheism, yet does not dare to advocate it ideologically.

That was why the change in function was impossible.

If the theatre had emerged as an insurmountable and unalterable mass of means of production and if, from this concrete starting point, the issue of altering this public institution had broadened into the new (insoluble) issue of transforming the entire social order conditioning this institution – then it was in this way (not independently of but through these realizations and the investigations that sought to establish them) that the new dramatic writing came into unexpected and violent contact with *reality*, even on its own territory. The new dramatic writing was affected by its sighting of economics in a similar way to the unveiling of the picture at Sais. It became a pillar of salt. Mulling things over, it observed Piscator's experiments, which were just then beginning and which, as it quickly realized, were of a piece with its own experiments: they were more *dramatic* than theatrical, directed towards the drama itself: dramatic in the new sense that encompassed the theatre in its entirety. The subjective dimension of potential



factuality was discovered: objectivity as partisanship. What appeared here as tendentiousness was the tendentiousness in the material itself (what was *conspicuous* as tendentiousness was at worst a skeleton construction, where the material was not yet sufficiently well identified). A particular type of literature emerged (already present in preliminary studies for plays like *Wheat!*) as the most real reality, and in this literature not only was concrete material already available concerning the new subject matter of dramatic writing – that is, human beings' relationships with each other – but *dialectics* had also been recognized as such and developed, in other words that way of seeing that the new dramatic writing had practised in a vacuum. Its own dialectic had led it to economics, and economics led it to a higher stage of dialectics, the *conscious* stage.

[‘*Die dialektische Dramatik*’, BFA 21/431-3]

Written in 1930/31. Brecht had intended to write a substantial essay on ‘Dialectical Dramatic Writing’, which he never completed, and the material presented here consists of the various texts, some unfinished, that he drafted for that essay. Brecht also drafted a series of philosophical and sociological notes on dialectics in 1931, some of which are included in *Brecht on Art and Politics* (pp. 103–6). Alfred Kerr was one of the leading theatre critics in the Weimar Republic and had accused Brecht of plagiarizing Villon translations by K. L. Ammer (pseudonym for Klaus Klammer) in *The Threepenny Opera*. The production of *Baal* that Brecht mentions is the Berlin premiere of the revised version, *Life Story of the Man Baal*, at the Deutsches Theater on 14 February 1926. Brecht’s reference to the legend of the veiled picture at the ancient Egyptian city of Sais may also draw on Friedrich Schiller’s poem ‘The Veiled Picture at Sais’, while his reference to being turned into pillar of salt is based on the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19, 26). *Wheat* is the alternative title for Brecht’s 1926 play fragment *Jae Fleischhacker*.

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

*Opera – but with innovations!*

For some time now there have been moves to renovate opera. The content of opera is to be *brought up to date* and its form *technologized* but without any changes being made to its culinary character. As opera is appreciated by its audience precisely because opera is antiquated, there ought to be a keen interest in attracting an influx of new social strata with new appetites, and this is indeed

the case: there is a will to *democratize*, without of course changing the character of democracy, which consists in giving the 'people' new rights but no opportunity to avail themselves of them. At the end of the day, it makes no difference to the waiter whom he is waiting on, all that matters is that somebody is waited on! And so our most advanced thinkers demand or defend innovations that are supposed to lead to the renovation of opera – but what they don't demand, and doubtless would not defend, is a discussion of opera's basic principles (its function!).

This modesty in the demands of our most advanced thinkers has economic causes to which they themselves are to some degree oblivious. The major apparatuses such as the opera, the theatre, the press *etc.* perpetuate their views incognito, as it were. For some time now, they have simply exploited the brainwork (in this case music, literature, criticism *etc.*) of brainworkers in order to gratify the appetites of their audience organizations, evaluating this work on their terms and channelling it in directions they choose. The brainworkers share in their earnings – economically speaking they are part of the ruling order, even though societally speaking they are virtually proletarianized – yet still subscribe to the myth that this entire operation merely utilizes their brainwork; it is a secondary process, in other words, that does not influence their work but simply guarantees its influence. Musicians, writers and critics are thus plagued by a lack of insight into their situation, with drastic consequences that very much tend to be ignored. As they hold the opinion that they own an apparatus that actually owns them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have any control – which is no longer, as they believe, a means for the producers, but has turned into a means directed against the producers, in other words against their own production (where the latter follows its own new rationale, which does not conform with the apparatus or is even in opposition to it). Their production comes to resemble that of sub-contractors. A concept of value emerges that is based on exploitation. And this generally results in the practice of assessing each art-work in terms of its suitability for the apparatus, but never of assessing the apparatus in terms of its suitability for the art-work. So we're told that this or that work is good, and what is meant, but not said out loud, is 'good for the apparatus'. This apparatus, however, is determined by existing society, and only assimilates whatever keeps it going in this society. We could possibly discuss any innovation that does not threaten the social function of this apparatus, namely evening entertainment. But what cannot be discussed are any innovations that might press for a change in its function and so would reposition it in society, for instance by linking it up with educational establishments or major organs of mass communication. Society uses such apparatuses to

assimilate whatever it needs to reproduce itself. And so the only ‘innovations’ that can get through are those that lead to the renovation – but not the transformation – of existing society, no matter whether this form of society is good or bad.

Our most advanced thinkers are not interested in changing these apparatuses because they believe that they have in the palm of their hand an apparatus that serves up their free inventions, and so is automatically transformed every time they think. But their invention is not free: the apparatus carries out its functions with or without them, the theatres play every evening, the newspapers appear so many times a day; they assimilate whatever they need, and they simply need a specific quantity of material.<sup>5</sup>

It might be assumed that exposing this state of affairs (the inescapable dependence of creative artists on the apparatus) would be tantamount to condemning it. After all, it is hidden away so coyly!

However, restricting the free invention of the individual is actually a progressive process. Individuals are involved more and more in major events that are transforming the world. No longer can individuals simply ‘express’ themselves. They are called upon to solve general problems and are put in a position to do so. The trouble is that apparatuses today are not there for the benefit of the general public, the means of production are not owned by the producers, and as a result work takes on the character of a commodity and is subject to the general laws governing commodities. Art is a commodity – and cannot be manufactured without means of production (apparatuses)! An opera can only be composed for the opera. (It’s not as if you can dream up an opera like a sea-monster in a Böcklin painting and then put it on show in an aquarium after seizing power; and it would be even more ridiculous to try and smuggle it into our good old zoo!) Even if you wanted to put opera as such (its function!) on the agenda, you would have to compose an opera.

*Opera –*

The opera we have today is *the culinary opera*. It was a means of enjoyment long before it was a commodity. It promotes enjoyment even when it calls for or imparts education, because in that case it calls for or imparts an education in good taste. It approaches every subject with relish. It ‘experiences’, and it functions as an ‘experience’.

Why is *Mahagonny* an opera? Its basic attitude is that of opera, in other words it is culinary. Does *Mahagonny* approach its subject with relish? It does. Is *Mahagonny* an experience? It is. Because *Mahagonny* is fun.

*The opera 'Mahagonny' does justice to the irrationality of the operatic genre in a deliberate manner.* This irrationality of opera consists in the fact that it uses rational elements and strives to be vivid and real, but at the same time all those aspects are cancelled out by the music. A dying man is real. But if he sings at the same time, the sphere of irrationality is attained. (If the *listener* were to sing while watching him, that would not be the case.) The more unclear and unreal reality becomes thanks to the music – a third dimension comes into being, of course, very complex and quintessentially real, which can generate quite real effects yet is completely remote from its subject, from the reality that is being utilized – the more enjoyable the entire process becomes: the degree of enjoyment is a direct function of the degree of unreality.

Once *Mahagonny* was categorized as opera – putting that category in question was not at issue – everything else ought to fall into place. In other words, something irrational, unreal and frivolous, put in the right place, ought to cancel itself out in both senses of the word.<sup>6</sup> The irrationality that appears here is appropriate only to the context in which it appears.

An attitude like this relishes enjoyment.

As regards the content of this opera – *its content is enjoyment*. Fun, in other words, not just in its form, but also as its subject matter. At least, pleasure was to be the object of investigation, if investigation was to be the object of pleasure. Pleasure appears here in its contemporary historical form: as a commodity.<sup>7</sup>

It is undeniable that the initial effect of this content was bound to be provocative. When the glutton gorges himself to death in section thirteen, for example, he does so because of the prevalence of hunger. Although we do not even hint that other people were starving while he was gorging himself, the effect was provocative nonetheless. For even if not everyone who can stuff his face gorges himself to death, there are still lots of people who are starving to death because he is gorging himself to death. His enjoyment is provocative because it incorporates so much.<sup>8</sup> In similar situations today, when opera functions as a means of enjoyment, its effect is altogether provocative. True, it does not have that effect on its small number of listeners. In its provocative dimension we see reality re-established. *Mahagonny* may not be very tasteful, it may even (due to a guilty conscience) do its utmost not to be tasteful – it is culinary through and through.

*Mahagonny* is an opera, nothing more and nothing less.

– *But with innovations!*

Opera had to be brought up to the technical standards of the modern theatre. The

modern theatre is the epic theatre. The following table indicates some shifts of emphasis from dramatic to epic theatre.<sup>9</sup>

<b>Dramatic Form of Theatre</b>	<b>Epic Form of Theatre</b>
action	narration
involves spectators in events on stage	turns spectators into observers, but
consumes their activity	awakens their activity
enables them to have feelings	forces them to make decisions
experience	world-picture
the spectators are immersed in something	they are put in opposition to it
suggestibility	argument
emotions are preserved	are turned into insights
the spectator stands right in the middle	the spectator stands on the opposite side
shares in the experience	studies
human nature presumed to be common knowledge	human nature is object of investigation
humankind unchangeable	humankind changeable and able to change things
tension at the outcome	tension as you go
one scene for the next	each scene for itself
growth	montage
structure of events linear	in curves
evolutionary inevitability	jumps
human nature as fixed	human nature as process
thought determines being	social being determines thought
feeling	rationality <sup>10</sup>

Opera's invasion by the methods of epic theatre leads primarily to a radical *separation of elements*. The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and set design (which always raises the question 'What is supposed to give rise to what?' – does the music give rise to the events on stage, or do the events on stage give rise to the music) can simply be settled by radically separating these elements. As long as the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* means that the whole lot can be dealt with in one go, in other words as long as art forms are supposed to be 'fused together', then the individual elements must all be degraded to the same

degree, so that each one can only be a cue for the other. The smelting process takes hold of the spectator, who is also melted down and represents a passive (suffering) part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This sort of magic must of course be contested. Everything that aims to induce hypnosis, or is bound to produce undignified intoxication, or makes people befuddled, must be abandoned.

*Music, words and set design had to be made more independent of one another.*

(a) *Music.*

In the case of music, the following shift of emphasis came about:

<b>Dramatic Opera</b>	<b>Epic Opera</b>
action	narration
music serves up	music communicates
music intensifying the libretto	music interpreting the libretto
music reinforcing the libretto	taking the libretto as read
music illustrating	taking up a position
music painting the psychological situation	presenting behaviour

The music is the key issue.<sup>11</sup>

(b) *Libretto.*

It was necessary to fashion something instructive and direct from the fun, so that it would not simply be irrational. The form that emerged was the portrayal of manners. The portrayers of manners are the characters. It was necessary for the libretto not to be sentimental or moral, but to display sentimentality and morality. The written word (in the titles) came to be just as important as the spoken word. The audience is most likely to adopt the most relaxed attitude towards the work when reading.<sup>12</sup>

(c) *Set design.*

Displaying independent visual works in the context of a theatrical performance is something of a novelty. Neher's projections express an opinion on the events on stage, as when the actual glutton sits in front of the sketch of the glutton. The flow of events on stage repeats in its terms what is contained in the picture. Neher's projections are just as much an independent part of the opera as Weill's music and the libretto. They provide the opera's visual aids.

These innovations do, of course, presuppose that the audience that frequents opera houses will adopt a new attitude.

### *Consequences of these innovations – detrimental to opera?*

There can be no doubt that certain desires of the audience, which were gratified by the old opera without more ado, are no longer acknowledged by the new opera. How can the attitude of the opera audience be characterized, and can that attitude change?

Rushing out of the underground station, eager to become like putty in the hands of the magicians, grown men who have proved themselves ruthless in the struggle for existence rush to the theatre box-offices. As they hand in their hats at the cloakroom, they also hand over their customary behaviour, their attitude 'in real life'; leaving the cloakroom, they take their seat with the attitude of kings. Should we hold this against them? You needn't prefer a king's attitude to a cheese-monger's to find this ridiculous. The attitude these people adopt at the opera is unworthy of them. Is there any chance that they might change it? Can we get them to take out their cigars?

Certain developments have paved the way for a transformation that goes far beyond formal issues and is beginning to come to grips with the actual function of the theatre – its social function. From a technical point of view, 'content' has become an independent part, which libretto, music and set design 'respond to'; illusion has been abandoned in favour of disputation; and instead of being permitted to experience things, the spectators are supposed to take a vote, as it were – instead of becoming involved, they are to engage in argument.

The old type of opera completely rules out discussion of content. If, for example, the spectator were to express an opinion on some circumstance or other that was being depicted, then the old opera would have lost the battle, the spectator would have 'got away'. Of course, the old opera did contain elements that were not purely culinary – we must distinguish the period of its rise from that of its decline – *The Magic Flute*, *Figaro*, *Fidelio* all had an activist dimension and embodied a world view. Nevertheless, that world view, the element of risk notwithstanding, was always so conditioned by its culinary context that *the meaning* of these operas was on its last legs, as it were, and then found its final resting place in enjoyment. Once its original 'meaning' had withered away, it was by no means the case that opera had no meaning any more; it just had a different meaning, namely its meaning as opera. Content was sidelined in the opera. Contemporary Wagnerians make do with the memory that the original Wagnerians had identified a meaning and so were aware of it. As for the producers who are dependent on Wagner, they even doggedly cling on to the attitude of someone who has a world view. (A world view that, having no other useful purpose, is simply junked as a means of enjoyment!) (*Elektra*, *Johnny*

*Strikes Up*). An entire, richly developed technique is retained, which made this attitude possible: the philistine goes through his tranquil daily routine with the attitude of someone who has a world view. Only from this standpoint, from the perspective of meaning withering away (mind you, this meaning did *manage* to wither away), can the continued innovations ravaging opera be understood – as desperate attempts to invest this art form with a meaning retrospectively, a ‘new’ meaning where ultimately the musical dimension itself becomes that meaning – where, in other words, the sequence of musical forms acquires a meaning qua sequence, and certain proportions, shifts, *etc.* have been successfully transformed from a means into an end. This is progress that comes from nowhere and is going nowhere, that does not derive from new needs but merely satisfies the old needs with new stimuli, and thus has a purely conserving role. New thematic elements are incorporated that are as yet unfamiliar ‘in this location’, because when ‘this location’ was occupied they were still unfamiliar in others. (Locomotives, factories, aeroplanes, bathrooms *etc.* function as diversions. The better composers deny content altogether and carry it off – or rather away – in Latin.) Progress like this simply indicates that something is lagging behind. Progress like this is made without opera’s overall function being changed, or rather solely to prevent it from changing. And what about utilitarian music?

At the very moment when concert music had reached the stage of the most flagrant *l’art pour l’art* (this came about as a reaction to the emotional dimension of Impressionist music), the concept of utilitarian music emerged, born like Venus from the waves, as it were; where music made use of amateurs, one might say. The amateur was used in the same way a woman is ‘used’. Innovation upon innovation: the listener who had grown weary of listening became an enthusiastic player. The struggle against lazy listening was immediately transposed into the struggle for diligent listening, followed by diligent playing. The orchestral cellist, a father with numerous children, no longer played to express a world view, but for sheer joy. The culinary principle was saved!<sup>13</sup>

What is the point, people may wonder, of all this running on the spot? Why this dogged clinging on to hedonistic enjoyment, to intoxication? Why do they have so little interest in their own affairs once they step outside their own four walls? Why is there no discussion?

And the answer: nothing can be expected of discussion. A discussion of the current form of society, even if it concerned only its least significant parts, would immediately and uncontrollably entail an absolute threat to this very form of society.

We have seen that opera is sold as evening entertainment, which means that



all attempts to change it work within quite specific limits. As we can see, this type of entertainment must be ceremonial and dedicated to illusion. Why?

In our society, the old opera can hardly be ‘wished away’. Its illusions carry out functions that are important to society. Intoxication is indispensable; nothing can replace it.<sup>14</sup> Nowhere, except at the opera, do human beings have the opportunity to retain their humanity! All their rational functions have long since been reduced to anxious suspicion, cheating others and selfish calculation.

The old opera continues to exist not just because it is old, but mainly because the state of affairs it supports is still the old one. Though that’s not entirely the case. And therein lie the prospects for the new opera. Indeed, we should be asking today whether opera has not already reached a state where further innovations would lead not to the renovation of this artistic genre, but to its destruction.<sup>15</sup>

*Mahagonny* may well be as culinary as ever – just as culinary, in fact, as befits an opera – yet one of its functions, nevertheless, is to change society; it puts the culinary principle on the agenda, it attacks the sort of society that needs operas like this; it is still sitting pretty on the old branch, as it were, but at least it is sawing away at it (absent-mindedly or from a guilty conscience) a little ... And the innovations have done that with their siren voices.

Real innovations attack the base.

*For innovation – against renovation!*

The opera *Mahagonny* was written three years ago, in 1927. In the works that followed, attempts were made to emphasize the instructive dimension more and more forcefully at the expense of the culinary principle. In other words, to develop an object of instruction from the means of enjoyment, and convert certain institutions from entertainment establishments into organs of mass communication.

[‘Anmerkungen zur Oper “Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny” ’, BFA  
24/74-84]

First published in *Versuche*, volume 2, 1930. A first version, entitled ‘Zur Soziologie der Oper – Anmerkungen zu “Mahagonny” ’/‘On the Sociology of Opera – Notes on *Mahagonny*’, was written in collaboration with Peter Suhrkamp and appeared in August 1930 in the periodical *Musik und Gesellschaft/Music and Society*. The *Versuche* text is largely identical with the initial version, and also cites Suhrkamp as co-author. In footnote 1, Brecht refers to the section of his ‘Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*’ headed

‘Titles and screens’ (see pp. 71–2 below), which had appeared in *Programmblätter der Volksbühne* in September 1928, and to footnote 1 of his screenplay *The Bruise – A Threepenny Film* (see *Brecht on Film and Radio*, p. 132). The classical operas Brecht refers to are Mozart’s *Magic Flute* and *Marriage of Figaro*, Beethoven’s *Fidelio* and Richard Strauss’s *Elektra*. *Johnny Strikes Up* was one of the most successful operas dealing with contemporary subject matter in the Weimar Republic. Written in 1926 by Ernst Krenek, and premiered in Leipzig in 1927, it was generally seen as the first ‘jazz opera’. Brecht also notes the tendency of certain avant-garde composers to give their operas contemporary settings: locomotives – *Johnny Strikes Up*, factories – Max Brand’s *Machine Operator Hopkins*, aeroplanes – George Antheil’s *Flight*, bathrooms – Paul Hindemith’s *News of the Day*. His comment on opera in Latin probably refers to Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*. His discussion of utilitarian music confuses *Gebrauchsmusik* with its companion doctrine of *Gemeinschaftsmusik*, or amateur music played for the sake of the social virtue of playing together. The siren voices at the end of the essay allude to the singing of the Rhine maiden in Heinrich Heine’s 1823 poem ‘The Lorelei’.

## Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*

### *Reading plays*

There is no reason why John Gay’s motto for his *Beggar’s Opera* – ‘Nos haec novimus esse nihil’ – should be altered for *The Threepenny Opera*. The version printed in the *Versuche* presents little more than the prompt book of a play completely consigned to the theatres, and is thus aimed more at the expert than the aficionado. This not to say that converting as many readers or spectators as possible into experts is not a highly desirable goal – indeed, this conversion is already under way.

*The Threepenny Opera* engages with bourgeois ideas not only as content, in that it represents them, but also through the way it represents them. It is a kind of report on the aspects of life that spectators wish to see on stage. But alongside these aspects, spectators also see plenty of things they do not wish to see – they see their wishes not only fulfilled, therefore, but also criticized (they see themselves not as subjects but as objects), and this theoretically puts them in a position to confer a new function on the theatre. The theatre itself, however, resists any alteration of its function, and so it is a good idea for the spectator to mistrust the theatre and to read plays that aim not only to be performed in the

theatre but also to change it. Today the theatre is accorded absolute priority over dramatic literature. The primacy of the apparatus of the theatre is the primacy of the means of production. The apparatus of the theatre resists conversion to different purposes by immediately transforming any play it encounters so that the play no longer represents a foreign body within the apparatus, except where it neutralizes itself of its own accord. The need to stage new dramatic writing correctly – more important for the theatre than for dramatic writing – is mitigated by the fact that the theatre can stage *anything*: it ‘theatricalizes’ it all. There are, of course, economic reasons for this primacy of the theatre.

### *Titles and screens*

The screens on to which the titles of the scenes are projected represent a primitive attempt at *literarizing the theatre*. This literarization of the theatre, like the literarization of all public affairs, needs to be developed further, and on a large scale (see [Plate 4](#)).

Literarization means interspersing ‘construction’ with ‘formulation’ – it gives the theatre the opportunity to make links with other institutions for intellectual activity, but can only ever be one-sided unless the audience participates in it too, and uses it to gain access to ‘higher things’.

Someone with an academic approach to drama might object to the titles on the basis that the playwright should be able to say everything that needs to be said through the action of the play – that the literary work should be able to express everything within its own confines. The corresponding attitude for the spectator is that of not thinking about a subject but within the confines of that subject. But this practice of subordinating everything to a single idea, this urge to propel the audience along a single track where it can look neither right nor left, up nor down, is something that new dramatic writing must reject. The use of footnotes and the comparing of points on different pages need to be introduced into dramatic writing too.

Complex seeing must be practised. Then, however, thinking across the flow is almost more important than thinking in the flow. Moreover, the use of screens facilitates and imposes a new style of acting. This is the *epic style*. The spectators, as they read the projections on the screens, adopt a watching-while-smoking attitude. Such an attitude immediately extorts a better and more respectable performance from the actors, since it is hopeless to try to ‘cast a spell on’ a man who is smoking and whose attention is thus already occupied. A theatre like this would soon be full of experts, just as you have sports arenas full of experts. Actors would never dare serve up to these experts the few sorry scraps of mimicry that they currently cook up ‘somehow or other’ in the course

of a few rehearsals, putting no thought into them whatsoever. Nobody would accept their material in so raw and unfinished a state. The actor would have to find a very different way of drawing attention to those incidents announced in advance by the titles and thereby deprived of any intrinsic element of surprise.

There is a chance, unfortunately, that even titles and permission to smoke might not be quite enough to bring audiences round to a more fruitful use of the theatre.

### *The protagonists*

The character of *Jonathan Peachum* must not be made to conform to the standard 'scrooge' formula. He sets no store by money. To Peachum, suspicious as he is of anything that might inspire hope, money (like everything else) seems a very inadequate means of defending oneself. He is undoubtedly a villain, and a villain in the older theatrical sense. His crime lies in his world-picture. This world-picture is nasty enough to bear comparison with the achievements of any of the other great criminals, and yet by treating misery as a commodity he is merely following the 'onward march of history'. In practical terms: when Peachum takes money from Filch in the first scene he does not go and lock it away in a safe but simply sticks it in his pocket. Neither this money nor any other can save him. It is an effect of his conscientiousness, and a mark of his general hopelessness, that he doesn't just throw it away: he is incapable of throwing even the smallest thing away. He would feel exactly the same if he had a million shillings. For Peachum, neither his money (or all the money in the world) nor his brain (or all the brains in the world) are enough. This is also the reason he does not do any work and instead walks around his establishment with a hat on his head and his hands in his pockets, merely making sure nothing goes missing. A man who is genuinely afraid does not work. It is not pettiness that makes Peachum chain his Bible to his desk for fear of its being stolen. He gives no consideration at all to his son-in-law before bringing him to the gallows, because no personal quality of any kind could ever induce him to change his attitude towards a man who had taken away his daughter. Mackie Messer's other crimes interest Peachum only in so far as they provide ammunition to help bring about his ruin. As for his daughter, she is like the Bible: nothing more than a resource. The effect of this is more shocking than it is repellent, when you consider the extreme degree of desperation at which a man has no more use for anything in the world except the small handful of things that might save him from drowning.

*The robber Macheath* should be portrayed by the actor playing the role as a bourgeois phenomenon. The bourgeoisie suffer from a delusion that explains their fondness for robbers: that a robber is not a bourgeois. This delusion is the product of another: that a bourgeois is not a robber. So is there any difference? Yes: sometimes a robber is not a coward. The associations of 'peacefulness' that attach to the bourgeois in the theatre are re-established by Macheath-the-businessman's aversion to bloodshed, unless it should prove absolutely necessary to the running of the firm. Restricting bloodshed to a minimum, and rationalizing it, is a business principle: when necessary, Mr Macheath can perform extraordinary feats of swordsmanship. He knows what he owes to his reputation: circulating rumours of a certain romanticism is conducive to the rationalization mentioned above. He takes great care to ensure that every daring or at least every fear-inducing deed committed by one of his subordinates is attributed to him, and he will not tolerate, any more than a university professor will, a piece of work being signed by his assistants. To women he is not so much a handsome man as a well-off one. The original English drawings for the *Beggar's Opera* show a squat but sturdy man of around forty, with a head like a radish, already balding and not without dignity. He is absolutely serious, with no sense of humour whatsoever, and it is a sign of his respectability that where his business is concerned, he focuses more on exploiting his own workers than on robbing strangers. He is on good terms with the guardians of law and order, even if this involves a certain amount of expenditure, and this is not *only* in order to ensure his own safety: his common sense tells him that his own safety and that of his society are closely connected. An attack on public order, like the one Peachum threatens the police with, would be deeply repugnant to Mr Macheath. He does feel he needs an excuse for his visits to the ladies of Turnbridge, but the special nature of his business seems to furnish this excuse. He has been known to mix purely business affairs with pleasure, which he is entitled to do as a bachelor, in moderation; but where this intimate side of his life is concerned, he values his regular and pedantically punctual visits to a certain Turnbridge coffeehouse primarily because they are *habits*, which it is practically the main aim of his bourgeois life to maintain and multiply.

At any rate, the actor playing him must not under any circumstances let Macheath's frequenting of a whore-house form the basis of his characterization. It is one of the not uncommon but still incomprehensible instances of bourgeois demonic possession.

Macheath naturally prefers to satisfy his actual sexual urges in combination with certain comforts of a domestic nature: in other words, with women who are not entirely without means. He looks on his marriage as a way of securing his

business. However much he may dislike them, temporary absences from the capital are unavoidable in his profession, and his employees are far from reliable. Picturing his future, he sees himself not hanging from the gallows but sitting beside a peaceful fishing lake on the grounds of his own property (see [Plate 7](#)).

The actress playing *Polly Peachum* would be well advised to study the aforementioned characteristics of Mr Peachum: she is his daughter.

The police chief *Brown* is a very modern phenomenon. He harbours two personalities: as a private citizen he is very different from the way he is as a public official. And he exists not in spite of this dichotomy but because of it. And all of society exists with him thanks to this dichotomy of his. As a private citizen he would never stoop to things that as an official he considers to be his duty. As a private citizen he wouldn't (and wouldn't have to) hurt a fly ... His love for Macheath, therefore, is entirely genuine, it cannot be rendered suspect by certain commercial advantages arising from it: life just makes everything seem sordid ...

### *Tips for actors*<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to conveying the subject matter of the play, the spectator should not be sent off down the path of empathy – instead, a sort of communication takes place between the spectator and the actors, and ultimately, while maintaining a sense of distance and otherness, the actors address themselves directly to the spectator. In doing so the actors should tell the spectator more about the characters they are playing than ‘what it says in their part’. They must, of course, adopt the attitude necessary for this process to be easily accomplished. They must also, however, be able to forge relationships with processes other than those of the plot – they must not serve the plot exclusively, in other words. In a love scene with Macheath Polly is not only Macheath's lover but also Peachum's daughter; and she is never only his daughter but also his employee. Her interactions with the spectators must imply her criticism of the spectators' common preconceptions about robbers' brides, businessmen's daughters, *etc.*

1. The actors should try to avoid making these bandits resemble a gang of those sorry individuals in red neckties who hang around at fairgrounds and with whom no respectable person would consent to have a drink. They are staid men by nature, some of them portly and all of them, outside of working hours, quite affable. (scene 2)

2. Here the actors can demonstrate the usefulness of bourgeois virtues and the

intimate connection between sentiment and swindle. (scene 2)

3. This scene should demonstrate the brutal energy a man has to expend in order to create a situation where a humane attitude (that of a bridegroom) is possible. (scene 2)

4. It is important here to show how the bride, in all her carnality, is put on display just at the moment when she is definitively reserved for one purchaser. In other words, just as the supply is about to be cut off, the demand must be pushed back up as high as it will go, one last time. The bride is coveted by everybody, but the bridegroom is 'the lucky winner'. The whole occasion is theatrical through and through. What should also be shown is how little the bride eats. You see the daintiest little creatures wolfing down whole chickens and fish all the time – but you never catch a bride doing it. (scene 2)

5. When depicting things such as Peachum's establishment, the actors do not need to bother too much about the usual *progress of the action*. Having said this, they must not portray a setting but a process. An actor playing one of the beggars should aim to show the process of selecting a suitably dramatic-looking peg leg to fit him (trying one on, putting it aside, trying another and then picking up the first again) in such a way that this one short skit makes people decide on the spot that they will come back to the theatre again – and there is nothing to stop the theatre from announcing this skit on the backdrop screens! (scene 3)

6. It is absolutely desirable that the spectator should perceive Miss Polly Peachum as a virtuous and likeable girl. Having proved her entirely uncalculating love in the second scene, she now demonstrates the practical disposition without which that love would amount to no more than ordinary recklessness. (scene 4)

7. These ladies enjoy uninterrupted possession of their means of production. But for this very reason they may not give the impression of being free. For them, democracy does not hold the same freedom as it does for those whose means of production can be taken from them. (scene 5)



**Figure 2** Caspar Neher's sketch for Peachum's outfitting shop for beggars, opening scene, *The Threepenny Opera*.

8. Actors playing Macheath who display no inhibition at all when performing the death scene will usually refuse, at this point, to sing the third verse: they would not have anything against a tragic presentation of sex, of course, but in our era sex unquestionably belongs in the realm of comedy, because sexual life is in contradiction to social life, and this contradiction is comic because it is historically resolvable – resolvable by a different social order, that is. The actor's rendition of a ballad like this one must, therefore, be comical. The representation of sexual life on the stage is very important, if only because it is always accompanied by a kind of primitive materialism. The artificial and ephemeral nature of all social superstructures becomes visible. (scene 5)

9. This ballad, like others in *The Threepenny Opera*, contains several lines by François Villon, translated by K.L. Ammer. The actors will benefit from reading Ammer's translation, to see what the differences are between a ballad designed to be sung and a ballad designed to be read. (scene 6)

10. This scene is a gift to any actress playing Polly who has a talent for comedy. (scene 8)

11. At this point, pacing round and round his cage, the actor playing Macheath can give a rerun of all the different gaits he has presented to the audience thus



far. The bold strut of the seducer, the despondent tread of the wanted man, the arrogant swagger, the step of one who has learned his lesson, *etc.* During this brief tour of his cage he can replay all the attitudes Macheath has adopted over the past few days. (scene 9)

12. At this point in the play an actor of the epic theatre will not, for example, make the mistake of trying to emphasize Macheath's fear of death so that it becomes the dominant theme of the whole act, causing the subsequent depiction of *true* friendship to go by the board. (Though true friendship is surely only true when it has its limits. The moral victory of Mr Macheath's two truest friends is hardly diminished, after all, by the moral defeat of both men later on, when they are not in *enough* of a hurry to hand over their means of subsistence in order to save their friend.) (scene 9)

13. The actor might perhaps find a way of showing the following: Macheath feels, quite rightly, that his case is subject to a gross miscarriage of justice. In fact, justice would forfeit its reputation entirely if *bandits* fell victim to it more often than they currently do! (scene 9)

### *On singing the songs*

When an actor sings, his function changes. There is nothing more abhorrent than an actor pretending not to notice that he has left the level of everyday speech and started singing. The three levels – everyday speech, elevated speech and singing – must always remain separate from each other, and under no circumstances should elevated speech become a heightened version of everyday speech, or singing a heightened version of elevated speech. Under no circumstances, therefore, should singing set in where an excess of emotion makes speech impossible. The actor must not only sing but also show a person singing. His aim should be not so much to bring across the emotional content of his song (does anyone have the right to offer others a dish he has already eaten himself?) but to show gestures that represent the manners and customs of the body, as it were. To this end, he is better off not using the actual words of the text when rehearsing – instead he should use common, everyday phrases that express more or less the same thing, but in the brash language of day-to-day life. As for the melody, he should not follow it blindly: there exists a kind of speaking-against-the-music that can produce very powerful effects, arising from a stubborn, incorruptible sobriety independent of music and rhythm. If he does take up the melody, this must be an event; the actor can emphasize it by clearly demonstrating his own enjoyment of the melody. It is helpful to the actor if the musicians are visible during his performance and also if he is allowed to make visible preparation for it (by repositioning a chair perhaps, or doing his own make-up, *etc.*). During the

song in particular, it is important that ‘the shower is shown’.

*Why is Macheath arrested twice instead of once?*

From the point of view of German pseudo-Classicism, the first prison scene is a *diversion*, while to us it is an example of primitive epic form. It is a diversion if, as this purely dynamic dramatic writing does, you give priority to the idea and make the audience desire an ever more definite goal – in this case the hero’s death – and if you create an ever-increasing demand for the supply, as it were, and construct a single inevitable chain of events to facilitate the intense emotional involvement of the audience (for emotions will only venture on to completely secure ground, and cannot tolerate disappointment of any sort). *The epic kind of dramatic writing, with its materialist standpoint* and its lack of interest in the emotional investment of its audience, knows no goal, only an ending, and has a different sort of inevitability, whose course need not follow a straight line but may also proceed in curves or even in leaps. The kind of dramatic writing that is dynamic, idea-oriented and focused on the individual was, in every decisive respect, more radical when it began (under the Elizabethans) than it was two hundred years later in the time of German pseudo-Classicism, which confused the dynamics of representation with the dynamics of what was to be represented and had already ‘sorted out’ its individual. (The present-day successors of these successors are no longer recognizable: the dynamics of representation have morphed over time into an empirically obtained, cunning arrangement of multiple effects, and the individual, now in a state of complete dissolution, continues to be perfected and rounded, but now only ever for theatrical roles – whereas the late bourgeois novel has at least worked to develop psychology, or so it believes, to enable it to analyse the individual – as if the individual had not simply disintegrated long ago.) But this great drama was less radical in terms of eradicating subject matter. Its structure did not rule out the possibility that individuals might deviate from their linear courses, driven to do so by ‘Life’ (external connections always play a part here, connections to occurrences ‘off-stage’, a far larger cross-section is exposed in this way) but rather used these deviations to power the dynamics of the play. This irritation enters the sphere of the individual and is overcome there. The whole force of this kind of dramatic writing springs from the accumulation of resistances. The organization of the subject matter is not yet dictated by the desire for an easy ideal formula. An element of Baconian materialism still survives here, and the individual is also still made of flesh and bone, and resists being formulized. But wherever there is materialism, epic forms arise in dramatic writing, most frequently and most numerous in comedy, which is

always more materialistically minded, always 'lower'. Today, when we must regard the human essence as 'the ensemble of all societal relations', the epic form is the only one that can comprehend those processes that provide dramatic writing with material for a comprehensive world-picture. Likewise, human beings – flesh and blood human beings – can now be comprehended only via those processes through which and in the course of which they exist. New dramatic writing must systematically incorporate 'experimentation' into its form. It must be free to use connections in every direction, it needs static equilibrium and is inhabited by a tension that acts upon all its component parts and 'positions' them against one another. (In other words, this form is anything but a revue-like sequence of sketches.)

*Why must the mounted messenger be mounted?*

*The Threepenny Opera* gives a representation of bourgeois society (and not only of 'lumpenproletarian elements'). This bourgeois society, for its part, has produced a bourgeois world order, and thus a specific world view, which it cannot very easily do without. Wherever the bourgeoisie sees its world represented, the appearance of the King's mounted messenger is absolutely inevitable. Mr Peachum's efforts are no different when he financially exploits the guilty conscience of society. Theatre practitioners might want to think about why nothing could be more stupid than getting rid of the mounted messenger's horse, the way almost all the modernist directors of *The Threepenny Opera* have done. When a judicial murder is depicted on stage, the only way of doing justice to the role of theatre in bourgeois society is undoubtedly to have the journalist who reveals the innocence of the murder victim pulled into the courtroom by a swan. Don't people realize how tactless it is to trick the audience into laughing at themselves by letting the appearance of the mounted messenger become a cause for mirth? Without the appearance of some form of mounted messenger, bourgeois literature would descend into nothing more than a representation of situations. The mounted messenger guarantees a genuinely untroubled enjoyment even of situations that are inherently intolerable and is therefore a *conditio sine qua non* for a literature whose *conditio sine qua non* is a lack of consequences (see [Plate 8](#)).

Obviously the third finale should be played with the utmost solemnity and dignity.

[*'Anmerkungen zur "Dreigroschenoper"* ', BFA 24/57-68]

First published in *Versuche*, volume 3, 1931. John Gay's Latin motto means

‘We didn’t know it was nothing’, and the original drawings for *The Beggar’s Opera* were two engravings by William Hogarth. The scene numbers given in ‘Tips for Actors’ correspond to the standard 1931 version of the text (see, for example, Methuen *Collected Plays: Two*). In footnote 1, p. 75 ‘Versuch 5, “On Opera” ’ refers to ‘Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*’. Brecht’s observation that the human essence consists in ‘the ensemble of all societal relations’ is based on the sixth of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*. The reference to the swan is an allusion to Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin*.

## Notes on the Comedy *Man Equals Man*

### 1. Notes on directing

For the Berlin production of *Man Equals Man*, a parable-style play, unusual methods were adopted. Using stilts and wire coat-hangers, the soldiers and the sergeant were turned into monsters, immensely tall and immensely broad. Their faces were partly covered by masks and they wore giant hands. At the very end of the play the packer Galy Gay was transformed into a monster of the same kind (see [Plate 6](#)).

The four transformations were clearly distinguished from one another (transformation of the soldier Jeremiah Jip into a god; transformation of Sergeant Fairchild into a civilian; transformation of the canteen into an empty space; transformation of the packer Galy Gay into a soldier).

All the elements of the set were in the nature of props. During the transformation of Galy Gay, two screens in the background – made of canvas stretched across large iron frames – displayed images of Galy Gay before and after his transformation. Galy Gay is lying at the foot of the latter image when he wakes up after being shot. Projections illustrated the individual stages in the transformation process. The stage was set up in such a way that it could be made to look completely different simply by removing a few items of scenery.

The ‘Song of the Flow of Things’, recited during the transformation by the proprietress of the canteen, was accompanied by three different actions. The first was the gathering up of the awnings: as the proprietress moved along the front of the stage, reciting, facing the audience, she gathered up the two awnings using a stick with an iron hook attached to the end. Next came the washing of the awnings: kneeling beside an opening in the stage, she lowered the dirty pieces of cloth into the hole, swirled them around as if in water, and lifted out clean ones.

The third action was the folding of the awnings: the proprietress and the soldier Uria Shelley held them up so that they hung across the whole length of the stage, then folded them together.

The transformation of Sergeant Fairchild into a civilian (No. 4a) was clearly marked out as an interlude by having the curtain fall before and after it. The stage manager came forward with the script and read out short captions throughout the process. At the beginning: 'And now an interlude: the arrogance and destruction of a great personality.' Following the line ... Yes, because that's a civilian coming ...: 'As the army was decamping, Sergeant Fairchild went to see Widow Begbick on a personal matter.' Following the line ... Shut your face, civvy! ... : 'He did not learn from bitter experience. Dressed as a civilian, he tried to impress the widow with his reputation as a great soldier.' After the line ... You really should do it, for me ...: 'In order to win over the widow, he showed off his marksmanship without a second thought.' After the line ... There's not a woman in ten who wouldn't love a wild and bloody man ... 'A famous incident lost its power to shock.' After the line ... that the canteen had to be packed up for military reasons ...: 'Even when explicitly reminded of his duties, the sergeant insisted on pursuing his own desires.' After ... and stop him demoralizing the company ...: 'Thus his incomprehensible stubbornness in relation to his personal affairs caused him to forfeit the great name that he had built up through long years of service.'

## 2. *On the question of criteria for judging acting (Letter to the Berliner Börsen-Courier)*

Among those who followed the ostensibly epic production of the play *Man Equals Man* at the Staatstheater with *interest*, there were differences of opinion concerning the performance of the actor Lorre, who played the leading role. Some felt that his acting style, from the new point of view, was particularly apt – exemplary even – while others rejected it out of hand. I myself belong to the first group. This issue needs to be accorded the utmost priority, and to this end I should make clear – having been present at all the rehearsals myself – that it was not lack of talent that made the actor's performance disappointing for certain people; those who felt at the performance that he did not have the necessary force and vigour to 'carry' the play or the power to 'make himself clear' would quickly have been reassured about his abilities in that direction if they had witnessed the early rehearsals. If these qualities, which have hitherto been seen as the hallmarks of a great and talented actor, were not much in evidence in Lorre's performance (making way, in my view, for other qualities, the hallmarks of a new style of acting), that is because this was precisely what the rehearsals

were supposed to achieve: the rehearsals, therefore, and nothing else, are what people should pass judgement on; the rehearsals are the reason for the differences of opinion.

A specific question we might ask is this: how far can a radical change in the function of the theatre counteract the current dominance of certain generally accepted criteria in determining our assessment of an actor? We can simplify this question by confining ourselves to two of the main objections levelled against the actor Lorre, as mentioned above: firstly that his speech did not make his meaning clear, and secondly that he acted episodically.

Presumably the objection to his manner of speaking applied less to the first part of the play than to the second, with its long speeches. The speeches in question are Galy Gay's arguments against the verdict just after it is passed, his protests at the wall when he is about to be shot, and the monologue on identity which he delivers over the coffin before it is buried. In the first part it was not so obvious that Lorre's manner of speaking had been broken up according to gestic principles, but in the long summarizing speeches of the second part this same manner came across as monotonous, and seemed to get in the way of the meaning. In the first part it hardly mattered that people did not necessarily recognize (and feel the impact of) the way in which Lorre's manner of speaking brought out gestic elements, but in the second part this lack of recognition completely destroyed the effect. For over and above the meanings of individual sentences, there was a specific basic *gestus* being brought out here: it was reliant to a certain extent on the meanings of individual sentences to make itself apparent, but ultimately these meanings simply served it as a means to an end. The content of the speeches was made up of contradictions, and the actor had to try not to let the spectator identify with individual sentences and thereby get tangled up in contradictions, but to *keep the spectator out of them*. It had to be as objective an exposition as possible of a contradictory internal process in its entirety. Certain particularly revealing sentences were therefore put 'in the spotlight', that is to say declaimed loudly, and the selection of these sentences was an almost intellectual accomplishment (of course this same kind of accomplishment is also generated by an artistic process). Such was the case with the sentences 'I demand an end to all this!' and 'It was raining yesterday evening?' Thus the sentences (sayings) were not made accessible to the spectators but kept at a distance from them, they were not led but left to make their own discoveries. The 'objections to the verdict' were split into separate lines by caesuras as in a poem, so that the tone became that of trying various different arguments one after another, and the fact that these individual arguments never followed on logically from one another was assessed and even

exploited. The idea was to give the impression of a man simply reading out a statement for the defence prepared at some earlier time, without any present understanding of what this statement meant. And this was indeed the impression left on those spectators capable of such observations. At first sight though, admittedly, it was possible to overlook the truly brilliant way in which the actor Lorre delivered this 'inventory'. This may seem strange. For in general – and quite rightly – the art of not being overlooked is considered to be vital, and here we are suggesting that something we have to actively look for before we can detect it is brilliant. Nevertheless, epic theatre has profound reasons for insisting on such a reversal of criteria. One aspect of the social transformation of the theatre is that the spectators cannot be worked upon to the usual extent. The theatre should not arouse their interest – it should be the place where they bring their interest with them to be satisfied. (Epic theatre therefore requires us to revise our ideas about 'tempo'. Mental processes, for example, demand quite a different tempo from emotional ones, and do not always permit the same degree of acceleration.)

We made a short film of the performance, concentrating on the main pivotal points of the action and cutting in such a way as to bring out the gestic quality of the performance in a very abbreviated form. This interesting experiment gives a surprisingly good illustration of how well Lorre, in these long speeches, manages to convey the basic meaning underlying every (inaudible) line.

As for the other objection, it is possible that epic theatre, with its very different attitude to the individual, will simply do away with the notion of one actor 'carrying' the play. The play is no longer 'carried' by an actor in the old way. The old kind of actor was distinguished by a certain aptitude for the sustained and coherent internal evolution of the leading role. In epic theatre this is not so important. Nevertheless, epic actors may actually need an even greater range than the old heroes did, because they need to be able to portray their character as coherent despite – or preferably by way of – all the breaks and jumps. Since everything depends on the development, on the flow, the individual phases must be clearly distinguishable, and therefore separate, yet this must not happen in a mechanical way. What is needed here is an entirely new set of rules for the art of acting (acting against the flow, letting fellow actors influence one's characterization, etc.). When Lorre, at a specific moment in the play, paints his face white (instead of letting his acting be influenced more and more 'from within', by a fear of death), he may initially give the impression of being an episodic actor, but this is not the case at all. At the very least he is helping to make the dramaturgy more conspicuous. But of course there is more to it than that. The character's development has been very carefully divided into four

phases, for which four masks are used (the packer's face – until partway through the trial; the 'natural' face – until Galy Gay wakes up after being shot; the 'blank page' – until his reassembly after the funeral speech; and finally: the soldier's face). To give some idea of our way of working: there were different opinions as to when Lorre's face should be painted white, whether it should happen in the second phase or the third. After much consideration Lorre went for the third phase, feeling that this was where 'the biggest decision and the biggest strain' occurred. Between fear of death and fear of life he chose to treat the latter as the more profound.

Similarly, the epic actor's efforts to make certain incidents between people conspicuous (to use people as a milieu), may lead some to the mistaken conclusion that the epic actor is a short-range episodist, if they fail to take into account how epic actors link all the separate incidents together and absorb them into the overall flow of their performance. Unlike dramatic actors, who have their character established from the start and simply go on to expose it to the adversities of the world and the tragedy, epic actors allow their character to develop before the spectator's eyes through the way they behave. 'The way he gets recruited', 'the way he sells an elephant', 'the way he pleads his case' do not, however, amount to any kind of single, immutable character but to one that is changing all the time and that in course of this 'way of changing' becomes more and more clearly defined. This is not immediately evident to the spectator who is used to something different. How many spectators are able to free themselves from a 'craving for suspense' to the point where they notice the way this new sort of actor employs different sorts of behaviour in similar situations, when he is summoned to the wall to change his clothes using the same gesture that is subsequently used to summon him there to be shot? An attitude is here required of the spectator that roughly corresponds to a reader turning the pages of a book in order to make comparisons. The epic actor requires a completely different economy from that of the dramatic actor. (Charlie Chaplin, incidentally, would in many ways be more suited to the demands of epic theatre than those of dramatic theatre!)

It is possible that the epic theatre, more than other kinds of theatre, may need credit a priori in order to really come into its own, and this is a problem that merits some attention. Perhaps the incidents portrayed by the epic actor need to be familiar ones, in which case historical incidents would be the most immediately suitable. It might even be advantageous to be able to compare an actor with other actors in the same part. If all this and more were needed to make epic theatre effective, then it would have to be arranged somehow.



### 3. On the issue of concretization

The parable *Man Equals Man* can quite easily be concretized. The transformation of the petty-bourgeois Galy Gay into a ‘human fighting machine’ can take place in Germany instead of India. The Nazi Party Conference in Nuremberg can be substituted for the assembly of the army in Kilkoo. The elephant Billy Humph can be replaced by a car stolen from some private citizen and now the property of the Storm Troopers. The breakin can take place at a Jewish junk shop instead of at Herr Wang’s temple. Jip would then be taken on by the shopkeeper as his Aryan co-owner. The ban on causing visible damage to Jewish businesses would be accounted for by the presence of English journalists.

[‘Anmerkungen zum Lustspiel “Mann ist Mann” ’, BFA 24/45-51]

Sections 1 and 2 were written in 1931, section 3 in 1938. Section 2 is a letter to the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, published 8 March 1931. Brecht’s own production of the 1931 version of *Mann ist Mann* (first version 1926) had opened at the Staatliches Schauspielhaus in Berlin on 6 February 1931. Caspar Neher was stage designer, Peter Lorre played Galy Gay and Helene Weigel Leokadja Begbick. Brecht’s conception of the play had greatly altered since its 1927 premiere in Darmstadt, and it had a short and highly controversial run in which Lorre’s performance was adversely criticized. The three speeches referred to come in scene 9, subsections 4 and 5. The silent 16mm film of the production was made by Carl Koch. The Nazi Party’s rallies in Nuremberg were large-scale propaganda events; the Storm Troopers constituted the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party (see [Plate 6](#)).

#### Notes on *The Mother* (1933)

##### 1.

Written in the style of the learning plays, but requiring actors, *The Mother* is a piece of anti-metaphysical, materialist, *non-Aristotelian* dramatic writing. This does not draw on the *passive empathy* of the spectator anywhere near as readily as the Aristotelian type, and it also has a different approach to certain psychological effects, such as catharsis. Just as it refrains from handing over its hero to the world as to his inescapable fate, so it would not dream of handing over the spectator to a hypnotic theatrical experience. In the attempt to school its

spectators in a specific sort of practical behaviour, one that aims to change the world, it must begin by getting them to adopt a fundamentally different attitude in the theatre from the one they are used to. Below is a description of some of the methods employed in the first production of *The Mother* in Berlin.

## 2. Indirect impact of the epic stage

In the first production of *The Mother*, the set (designed by Caspar Neher) was not supposed to simulate any real locality: the set itself expressed an opinion, as it were, on the incidents happening on stage; it quoted, narrated, prepared and recalled. Its sparse indication of furniture, doors, *etc.* was limited to objects that had a part in the play, that is, those without which the action would have proceeded differently or not at all. A fixed arrangement of vertical iron pipes, each a little taller than a man, was erected across the stage, with the pipes at varying distances from one another; other moveable, extendable horizontal pipes with screens attached to them could be slotted into the vertical ones, and this allowed for quick changes. Between them hung doors in frames, which could be opened and shut. A large screen at the back of the stage was used for the projection of text and images, which remained there throughout the scene, so that the screen looked like just another part of the backdrop. Thus the stage not only indicated physical rooms but also used text and images to depict the great intellectual movement that the events being depicted on stage were part of. The projections are by no means basic mechanical aids providing supplementary information, nor are they prompts; they offer the spectators not help but opposition: they prevent them from feeling complete empathy and from automatically allowing themselves to be swept along by the performance. The projections turn the impact into an *indirect one*. They are therefore organic parts of the work of art.

### 3. Projections

[list omitted, pp.116-7]

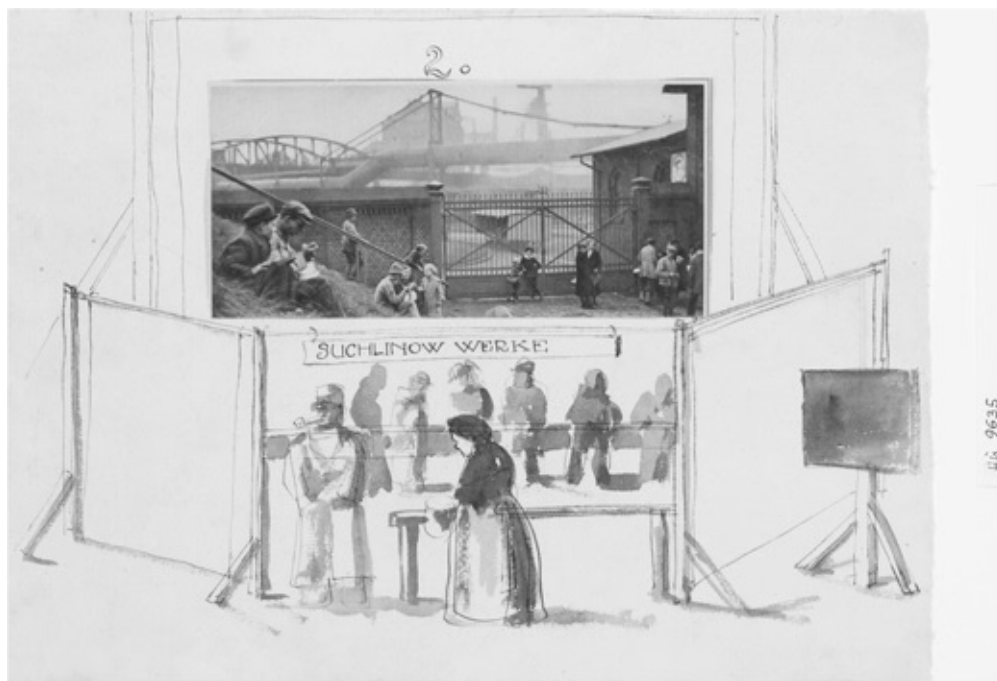
## 4. The epic method of representation

Epic theatre uses the simplest possible groupings, ones that clearly reveal the meaning of the incidents portrayed. It abandons 'random', 'lifelike', 'casual' grouping: its stage does not reflect the 'natural' disorder of things. Its goal is the

opposite of natural disorder: natural order. The ordering principles are of a social and historical nature. For some, it may simplify matters to think of the standpoint to be adopted by the director as that of the genre painter and the historian (although this does not suffice to characterize it fully). The second scene of *The Mother* includes the following incidents which the director should emphasize clearly and render distinct from one another:

1. The young worker Pavel Vlassova is visited for the first time by revolutionary comrades who want to use his home for illegal activities.

2. His mother is troubled to see him in the company of revolutionary workers and tries to get rid of them.



**Figure 3** Caspar Neher's set design for the 1932 production of *The Mother*.

3. The worker Mascha Chlatova sings a short song explaining that the workers must 'turn the whole State upside down' in their fight for bread and work.

4. When the police search her rooms, Pelagea Vlassova realizes what a dangerous operation her son is now involved in.

5. Though appalled by the policemen's brutality, Pelagea Vlassova still maintains that her son is the one at fault, not the State. She censures him for it, and the workers who have led him astray still more.

6. Pelagea Vlassova realizes her son has been chosen for the dangerous task of handing out leaflets, and offers to hand them out herself to stop him from getting involved.

7. Following a brief discussion the revolutionaries hand over the leaflets to her. She is unable to read them.

These seven incidents must be portrayed as strikingly and meaningfully as any well-known historical incidents, without being sentimentalized. In this epic theatre, which serves the purposes of a non-Aristotelian type of drama, the actors must do all they can to make their presence felt *in between* the audience and the incident. This *making-one's-presence-felt* also contributes to the desired effect of indirect impact.

#### 5. *By way of an example: A description of the first portrayal of the Mother*

Below are a few examples of what the first actress to play the part of the Mother, Helene Weigel, demonstrated through epic acting:

1. In the first scene, the actress stood centre-stage in a certain typical posture and spoke her lines as though they had been written in the third person, so not only did she not pretend that she really was Vlassova or believed she was, or that she was actually speaking these words in real life, but she also prevented the spectators from imagining themselves (out of laxity and force of habit) into a specific living room and feeling themselves to be invisible eyewitnesses and eavesdroppers at a unique and intimate scene. Instead she openly introduced the spectators to the person they were going to be watching, for the next few hours, acting and being acted upon.

2. Vlassova's attempts to get the revolutionaries to leave were depicted in such a way by the actress that you could, if you were paying attention, detect her own amusement. Her reproaches to the revolutionaries were more frightened than fierce, and her offer to distribute the leaflets was full of reproach.

3. When she managed to get inside the factory gates, she demonstrated that it would be a great asset to the revolutionaries to win a fighter like her to their cause.

4. She receives her first lesson on the subject of economics with the attitude of a consummate realist. She challenges her opponents in this debate with a not unfriendly kind of energy, as idealists who cannot accept the way the world really is. For her, an argument needs to be not only true but also feasible.

5. In the May Day demonstration scene, the protestors spoke as if they were in court, but at the end the actor playing Smilgin indicated his collapse by dropping to his knees, and the actress playing the Mother bent down as she spoke her final words and picked up the flag that had slipped out of his hands.

6. From this point on, the Mother was portrayed as much friendlier and more self-assured, except at the very beginning of the scenes where she came across as frightened. She sang 'In Praise of Communism' softly and calmly.

The scene where the Mother and the other workers learn to read and write is one of the most difficult for the actors. They must not be distracted, by the spectators' laughter at particular lines, from the task of showing how much effort it takes for older people who are set in their ways to learn to read and write. This lends the scene the gravity of this truly historical process: the socialization of knowledge and the intellectual expropriation of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, exploited and restricted to physical work. This process is not hinted at 'between the lines' but directly stated. Many of our actors, when something in a scene is directly stated, immediately start to search anxiously through that scene for something indirect to portray. They pounce on the 'inexpressible' that lies between the lines, which needs *them* to bring it out. But this behaviour makes whatever is expressible and whatever is expressed seem banal, and is therefore damaging.

In the short scene 'Ivan Vesovchikov doesn't recognize his brother any more', the actress managed to demonstrate that Pelagea Vlassova does not believe the teacher's nature is unchangeable, but also does not explicitly point out the changes which have been achieved.

7. The Mother has to discuss her revolutionary activity with her son right under the enemy's nose, she fools the prison warden by displaying what appears to him to be the touching, harmless attitude of the run-of-the-mill mother. She enables him to show a harmless sympathy. While she herself is an exponent of a completely new and proactive kind of mother's love, she can still exploit her knowledge of the old, outdated, familiar kind. The actress demonstrated that the Mother is conscious of the humorous nature of this situation.

8. Also in this scene, the actress demonstrated that not only she herself but also Vlassova is gleefully aware of the faintly comical nature of the act she puts on. She clearly demonstrated Vlassova's confidence that an entirely passive (but flexible) attitude – that of righteous indignation – would be enough to bring the estate butcher round to a sense of class-consciousness. She played the part of the small, humble straw that breaks the camel's back. 'In Praise of the Vlassovas' (an example of modest praise) was recited in front of the curtain, and in the presence of Vlassova, who stood to one side a short distance away from the singers.

11. The mother's grief for her son can be implied by having her hair turn white. This grief is powerful, but is only implied. Naturally it does not destroy the humour, which is a key element in the description of God's disappearance.

12. At this point the actress not only challenged the workers she spoke to, but also showed herself to be one of them: taken together they amounted to an image of the proletariat around the time of the outbreak of war. The 'Yes!' in the

fourth-to-last line of the scene was uttered with particularly great care, in such a way that it almost came to constitute the main impact of the scene. Standing in the stooping posture of an old woman, the actress lifted her chin and smiled, uttering the word quietly, in head voice, drawing it out, as if she felt how tempting it was, in the proletariat's situation, to just let it all go and at the same time how imperative it was to keep going, to keep giving one's all.

14. At the beginning of the anti-war propaganda scene the actress stood with eyes averted, hunched over, her face covered by a large headscarf. She demonstrated the mole-like nature of the work.

From the range of potential traits she invariably selected those that would allow for the most comprehensive political treatment possible of the Vlassovas (highly individual, unique and special ones, in other words): the kind of traits that help the Vlassovas themselves in their work. It was as if she was performing for a group of politicians – but she was no less an actress for that, and no less of an artist.

## 6. Choruses

To combat the process of 'free' association and to prevent the spectator becoming 'immersed' in the events on stage, small choruses can be positioned around the auditorium to demonstrate the correct attitude to the spectators and invite them to form opinions, call upon their own experience, and exercise control. Choruses like this *appeal to the pragmatist in the spectator*. They call on spectators to free themselves from the world represented on stage and from the representation itself. Below are several examples of texts for choruses. They are designed to be adaptable (according to situation) and can be supplemented or replaced by the reading out of quotes or documents, or by songs.

### 6. Choruses

[list of chorus texts omitted, pp.122-4]

### 7. *Is non-Aristotelian drama like The Mother primitive?*

[press reports omitted, pp.124-6]

So this is what happens when politically enlightened people go to the theatre! Among all the comment that followed there was not a single line about the political consequences of the events! But the theatre can only be directed towards to a new social function if the spectator has a very strong interest in

politics or at least philosophy or practical behaviour. The workers who went to see *The Mother* certainly did not leave without having experienced something. Nor could they find the play to be primitive.

[press report omitted, p.126]

These spectators did not think for a moment that the play was portraying certain historical events in Russia so as to participate 'in spirit' in adventurous episodes; they did not think that it represented a 'crystallisation of the eternal human spirit' etc.; and they did not have any wish to forget the inhuman conditions in which they live – specific and alterable conditions. Instead, they were willing to mobilize all their experience, intelligence and pugnacity, to acknowledge difficulties and duties, to make comparisons, to raise objections, to criticize the behaviour of the characters on the stage or, by abstracting it from the context of the play and applying it to their own circumstances, to learn from it. They understood the play's psychology, which is an *applicable, political psychology*. The spectators are treated as someone faced with likenesses of people whose originals they have to deal with in real life – that is they have to make them speak and act, and not regard them as strictly or completely determined phenomena. The spectators' duty to their fellow human beings is to intervene in the determining factors. The dramatic text must support them in this duty. The determining factors, such as social milieu, specific incidents etc., should therefore be portrayed as alterable. By means of a certain interchangeability of occurrences and circumstances the spectators must be given the opportunity, and the duty, to assemble, experiment and abstract. Of all the differences existing between individuals, the ones which interest the *political* person – who comes into contact with these differences, is dependent upon them and grapples with them – are very specific differences (e.g. those which the leaders of the class struggle need to know about in order to make their job easier). Such a person sees no point in progressively stripping individual human beings of all their distinctive features until they are revealed as *the* quintessential human being: in other words, as an essence that cannot be altered any further. Human beings are to be understood in their role as the fate of human beings (of the spectators). It has to be a workable definition.

What we understand by the idea of 'grasping' human beings is nothing less than being able to get a handle on them. That 'total' overview we have of them, which outlines them in our minds and which is necessarily instantaneous, is not enough – rather, it is merely a precondition for the actual, decisive operation by which we are able to grasp them, an operation which manipulates them, and which in order to do so requires this very overview as a kind of plan. And this kind of overview cannot be obtained at all without such an operational plan: it

can only be obtained, and is only valid, with reference to this operation. We can only grasp another person when we are able to act upon that person. And we can understand ourselves, likewise, only by acting upon ourselves. It seems that for the moment the human being, characterized as somebody who uses and can be used by other human beings, has not been conclusively defined. But at least for the movement that aims to prevent the use (or misuse) of human beings by other human beings – the communist movement – it is practical to define human beings in this way. Defined thus, they will rise above their tractability and appear in their totality – however unexpectedly this may occur.

#### 8. *'Direct', bridging impact*

By demanding that a work of art exert a direct impact, the prevailing aesthetics demand an impact that bridges all social and other differences between individuals. Even today, Aristotelian dramas manage to bridge class differences in this way, although individuals are becoming increasingly aware of these differences. The same effect is created when class differences are the subject of such dramas, and even in cases where they take the side of a particular class. In each case a collective is created in the auditorium, *for the duration of the entertainment*, on the basis of the 'common humanity' shared by all the listeners. Non-Aristotelian dramatic writing as typified by *The Mother* is not interested in creating such a collective. It divides its audience.

[press report omitted, p.128]

#### 9. *Is communism exclusive?*

[press reports omitted, pp.128-9]

Almost all the bourgeois critics of *The Mother* told us that this play was exclusively 'a communist issue'. They spoke of this 'issue' just as they would of the issues of a rabbit breeder or a chess player – in other words, as something that concerns very few people and that above all cannot be judged by people who know nothing about rabbits or chess. But even if communism is not an issue for the whole world, the whole world is still an issue for communism. Communism is not one variant among many. Ruthlessly bent on abolishing the private ownership of means of production, it stands alone as a single line of thought, in opposition to those other lines of thought which always differ on some point or other but which are united in wanting to preserve private property. It lays claim to being the direct and only continuation of the great tradition of Western philosophy, and at the same time represents a radical change in the function of this philosophy, just as it is the only practical continuation of



Western (capitalist) development and as such also signals a radical change in function for the economy that has developed in the West. We can and must point out that our assertions are not limited and subjective but objective and generally binding. We do not speak for ourselves as a small part of the whole but for all of humanity, as the part that represents the interests of all of humanity (not just a part of it). Nobody has the right to assume, just because we are fighting for something, that we are not objective. These days, people who give the impression that they are not fighting for anything, so as to appear objective, will be found upon closer inspection to occupy a hopelessly subjective position, representing the interests of a tiny part of humanity. Viewed objectively, they will be seen to be betraying the interests of humanity as a whole by defending the continuation of the capitalist status quo with regard to property and production. The seemingly objective 'left-wing' bourgeois sceptics do not realize, or do not want anybody else to realize, that they are taking part in this great struggle, which is why they do not use the word 'struggle' in connection with the permanent exercise of violence (which time and force of habit have caused to slip from the general consciousness) by a small social stratum. The propertied class – a degenerate, sordid clique, both objectively and subjectively inhumane – must be forced to hand over all 'goods of an ideal nature', regardless of what an exploited humanity, prevented from producing, struggling to keep its head above water, wants to do with these goods in the future. First of all, whatever happens, this social stratum must forfeit any claim to be regarded as humane. Whatever the terms 'freedom', 'justice', 'humanity', 'education', 'productivity', 'courage', 'reliability' may come to mean in future, they will not be fit for use until they have been cleansed of every remaining trace of their function in bourgeois society. Our enemies are the enemies of humanity. They are not 'in the right' from their own point of view: their point of view is the very source of wrong. That they are the way they are may be inevitable. What is not inevitable is that they exist at all. It's understandable that they should defend themselves, but what they are defending is robbery and privilege, and understanding in this case should not equate to forgiving. Anybody who is a wolf to other human beings is not human, but a wolf. 'Goodness' today means – where basic self-defence on the part of huge masses turns into a final battle for the commanding heights – the destruction of those who make goodness impossible.

[press report omitted, p.132]

To bourgeois critics, works like this seem to presuppose certain interests that are not of a sufficiently general nature, instead of evoking this general nature. In

fact, however, these works presuppose interests (latent ones, at least) that are of a particularly general kind and for this very reason run counter to the interests of bourgeois critics. Those groups of brainworkers whose entire existence is bound up with the owners of the means of production are cut off not from the communist cause but from worldly causes. In cutting themselves off from the communists as from a one-sided, shackled, unfree mentality, all they are doing is cutting themselves off from the cause of humanity and allying themselves with a many-sided, free and unrestrained exploitation. A great many brainworkers have a strong sense that the world (their world) is riddled with dissonances, but do not behave accordingly. If you discount those who simply construct their own inherently dissonant mental world (which exists precisely by virtue of its dissonance), you are left with people who, despite being more or less aware of the dissonance, still behave as though the world were harmonious. Thus the world only intervenes inadequately in the thinking of such people; it can come as no surprise if their thinking then fails to intervene in the world. But this means that they then do not expect any intervention to proceed from thinking at all: and this results in the 'Pure Intellect', which exists in its own sphere, more or less encumbered by 'external' conditions. For these people, if *The Mother* leads them to engage with a working woman, it is not in an intellectual sense. It is a matter for the politicians. Just as the thinkers are cut off from praxis, the politicians are cut off from matters of the intellect. Why does the head need to know what the hand that fills its pockets is doing? These people are against politics. In practice, this means that they are for politics that is done *to* them. Their behaviour, even in their professional life, is political through and through. Pitching one's camp outside of politics is not the same as permanently residing outside of politics; and standing outside of politics is not the same as standing above it.

Some of them believe they could attain perfection within an imperfect polity, without needing to perfect that polity. But the essence of our state consists in having no use for human beings who have perfected themselves or are in the process of doing so. Everywhere you look you see institutions that require cripples, people with one arm or one leg or no legs. Government business can be best conducted by fools. In order to exercise their functions, our constables must be ruffians and our judges blind. Researchers must be deaf-mute, or at least mute. And the publishers of books and newspapers depend exclusively on illiterate people to stop them going bust. What is labelled intelligence is manifested not in the discovery and revelation of truth but in the discovery of untruth and the greater or lesser subtlety of concealment. There are some who lament the lack of great works and blame it on a shortage of great talents. But not even a Homer or a Shakespeare could versify what these people want to

hear. And those who lament the lack of great works can live very well without them, and would perhaps not be able to live with them.

#### *10. People's aversion to learning and their contempt for the useful*

One of the chief objections levelled by bourgeois critics against non-Aristotelian dramatic writing in the mould of *The Mother* is based on an equally bourgeois distinction between the terms 'entertaining' and 'instructive'. According to this distinction, *The Mother* may be instructive (if only for a small section of the potential audience, as the argument goes) but definitely not entertaining (not even for this small section). There is a certain pleasure to be got out of looking more closely at this distinction. Surprising as it may seem, the intention is quite simply to degrade learning by presenting it as not enjoyable. But in actual fact, of course, enjoyment is degraded by the deliberate suggestion that one can learn nothing from it. You don't have to look far to see the function assigned to learning in bourgeois society. It functions as the purchase of materially useful items of knowledge. This purchase has to be completed before the individual enters the process of production. Its sphere, therefore, is immaturity. To admit that I am still incapable of something that is a part of my profession, in other words to allow myself to be caught learning, is tantamount to confessing that I am uncompetitive and not creditworthy. People who go to the theatre for 'entertainment' resist being treated 'like schoolchildren' because they remember the fearful torments with which 'knowledge' was drummed into the youth of the bourgeoisie. The attitude of the learner is vilified.

Similarly, ever since human beings began to make use of one another solely by means of underhand tricks, most people have taken to despising the useful and the sense of the useful, for nowadays utility is only to be derived from the exploitation of one's fellow human beings.

The most useful kind of people are the exploitable ones, the ones with no rights. Before making themselves useful they need to have their rations cut. But even those who exploit them no longer derive respect from this but from what the resulting utility (extorted in the dark) makes possible in terms of material and intellectual expenditure. Even today we see evidence of that gesture, dating from feudal times, with which the feudal lord, already secure in his privilege, affected not to need to be useful to himself or to others; from the time of the suppression of the petty bourgeoisie, we see that contempt for those making themselves useful on the part of the capitalist who outflanks them and makes other people useful; and now we are starting to see signs of major disruption in ideological systems, caused by the rise of the downtrodden proletariat in relegating exploitative acts to the sphere of crimes committed in the dark. At the same time,

however, a new uninhibited and powerful sense of the useful is growing among the proletariat, a sense that cannot be accompanied by any scruples since it is bent on eradicating those conditions that generate profit by causing harm.

[‘Anmerkungen (1933)’, BFA 24/115-35]

First published in *Versuche*, volume 7, 1933, together with a revised version of the play text that had been used for the premiere. *The Mother* was first performed at the Komödienhaus am Schiffbauerdamm on 17 January 1932; the public premiere had been preceded by four private performances for proletarian activists at the Wallner Theater. It was directed by Emil Burri and Brecht, with Caspar Neher responsible for stage design and projections and Helene Weigel in the lead role. Brecht’s ‘Notes’ were produced in response to press criticisms, summarized by John Willett as follows: ‘Typical phrases from the newspaper criticisms were “a field-day for the likeminded, more effective than speeches and newspapers; but idiotic for the outsider”, and again: “As theatre and as literature – terrible. As political propaganda ... – worth taking seriously.” Against that the Communist Party’s *Rote Fahne* (which Brecht did not quote) saw “a new Bert Brecht .... He has not yet broken all the links that tied him to his past. He will, though. He will very soon have to.” This was true, although not quite in the sense in which it was meant.’ Soon after the publication of Brecht’s ‘Notes’ Hitler became Chancellor; the Reichstag building was burned down on 27 February 1933; and Brecht left Germany the next day (see [Plate 11](#)).

### **Notes on *The Mother* (1938)**

#### *9. Critique of the New York Production (for the weekly New Masses journal)*

The Theatre Union’s production of the play *The Mother* represents an attempt to introduce New York workers to a hitherto unfamiliar type of play. This type of play exemplifies a non-Aristotelian kind of dramatic writing that makes use of a new, epic kind of theatre, and exploits on the one hand the techniques of the fully evolved bourgeois theatre and on the other those of the small proletarian theatre groups that developed a novel and idiosyncratic style to serve their own proletarian ends following the revolution in Germany. This type of play is unfamiliar not only to audiences but also to actors, directors and playwrights. To direct these plays you need to have political knowledge and artistic capabilities of a sort that are not needed when producing traditional types of plays.

If there is *any* theatre in a position to move ahead of its audience instead of running after it, it is the proletarian theatre. But moving ahead of this audience does not mean preventing it from being involved in production. Our theatres should do far more than they currently do to ensure that the most politically and culturally astute elements of their audience have some control over the production process. A whole series of questions that arose during the production of *The Mother* could easily have been resolved by a collaboration with workers, which would have been simple to organize. Politically aware workers, for example, would never have accepted the theatre's claim that because it was so important to the audience that the play not last longer than two hours, it was absolutely essential to cut the anti-war-propaganda scene in the third act (even though it is only seven minutes long). They would at once have said: but that would mean having a scene showing how the vast majority of the proletariat rejected the Bolshevik programme in 1914 (12), immediately followed by the Revolution of 1917 (14) like a passively awaited gift from the gods! It is *vital* to show that revolutionary activity is needed in order to bring about such turnarounds, and vital to show how it should be carried out. These arguments would incidentally have saved the aesthetic structure of the third act, which was ruined by the ill-conceived removal of its main scene.

Dramatic writing such as *The Mother* simultaneously demands and permits a much greater degree of freedom for its sister arts, music and stage design, than other types of plays. We were very surprised to see the excellent stage designer given so little opportunity to realize his intentions. He had no say in the blocking or the positioning of the actors, nor was he consulted about the costumes. The last-minute decision to russify the costumes – a politically dubious operation, since it made them look like something out of a picture-book and lent an exotic local colour to the workers' activities – was made without asking his opinion. Even the lighting was arranged without his input. His design places the music and lighting equipment in full view. But because the pianos were not illuminated during the musical numbers, it looked as if they were only there because there was nowhere else to put them. ('But I was thinking of a plan/To dye my whiskers green,/And always use so large a fan/That they could not be seen'.) The lighting tricks of an illusionist theatre were applied in an anti-illusionist theatre: the light of an atmospheric October evening fell on simple walls and apparatus that were intended to produce quite different effects. Eisler got the same treatment when it came to his music. Because the director felt that the singers' groupings and gestus had nothing to do with the composer, several numbers were completely robbed of their impact because their political meaning was distorted. The chorus's song *The Party is in Danger* marred the entire

production. Instead of positioning the singers backstage or next to the musical instruments, the director had them burst into the room where the Mother was lying ill in bed and, gesticulating wildly, summon her to the Party's aid. An episode which should have shown an individual wanting to cleave to her Party in its hour of danger became an act of brutality; instead of showing the Party's call being answered even by those on their deathbeds, the scene depicted a sick old woman being hounded out of bed. The proletarian theatre must learn how to encourage the free development of the various arts necessary to its success. It must be able to listen to artistic and political arguments and should not give the director the opportunity for 'individual expression'.



**Figure 4** Poster for the Theatre Union production of *The Mother*, New York, 1935.

One important question is that of simplification. In order to show the behaviour of the play's characters clearly enough for the spectator to fully grasp the political significance of this behaviour, a number of simplifications are necessary. But simple does not mean primitive. In epic theatre it is perfectly possible for characters to provide their own very brief expositions, simply by telling the audience, for example: I am the teacher in this village; my work is very difficult because I have too many students, *etc.* But what is possible must first be made possible. This is where art comes in. The *gestus* and way of speaking must be carefully selected and moulded on a grand scale. Given that the spectator's interest is channelled exclusively towards the characters' behaviour, the relevant *gestus* must, from a purely aesthetic point of view, be significant and typical. Above all, the director needs to have a historian's eye. The short scene where Vlassova gets her first lesson in economics, for example, is far from being just an incident in her life. Rather, it is a historic event: under the crushing pressure of poverty, the exploited begin to think (see [Plate 12](#)). They discover the causes of their misery. Plays of this type are so concerned with the development of the life they depict, as a progressive process, that they can only really be fully effective on a second viewing. Some of the characters' lines can only be fully understood if you already know what those characters will say later on in the play. It is necessary, therefore, to mark out these lines in such a way that they will stick in people's memory. When *The Mother* was performed at the Theatre Union, the following lines were spoken in the right way: by Mrs Henry, in the scene where the Mother is ill in bed (unfortunately cuts were later made to this scene); by John Boruff as Pavel in the May Day demonstration scene, especially the passage 'Smilgin, worker, revolutionary, fifteen years in the movement on May First, at eleven o'clock in the morning', *etc.*; by Millicent Green in the Bible-tearing scene when, as the evicted tenant, she demands the Bible from her landlady in order to prove that Christians are supposed to love their neighbours.

The episodes cited above were spoken in the right way because they were spoken with the same sense of responsibility as a statement for the record in a court of law, and because the *gestus* was of the kind to stick in the memory.

All this is very difficult from an artistic point of view, and our theatre should not be discouraged by the occasional failure or merely partial success to begin with. If we can improve the organization of our artistic production, if we can manage to prevent our conception of theatre becoming too rigid, if we can develop our techniques and make them flexible – if we can learn, in short – then we will have the chance, given the incomparable readiness of our proletarian audience and the undeniably fresh impetus of our young theatre, to construct a

true proletarian art.

[‘9. Kritik der New Yorker Aufführung (Für die Zeitschrift “New Masses”)’, in  
‘Anmerkungen zur “Mutter” (1938)’, BFA 24/169-73]

First published in Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke. Band 2* (London: Malik-Verlag, 1938). In the wake of the New York production of *The Mother* in November 1935, Brecht revised and expanded his 1933 ‘Notes’ and wrote this critique of the New York production for *New Masses*, a weekly publication sympathetic to the USA Communist Party. The stage designer commended by Brecht was Mordecai Gorelik (see ‘A Short Private Lecture for My Friend Max Gorelik’ in [Part Two](#)). The small proletarian theatre groups Brecht refers to, which emerged in Germany after the revolutionary period between November 1918 and January 1919, included Piscator’s Proletarian Theatre (1920–1) in the early years of the Weimar Republic and were superseded in its final years (1929–33) by some 200 agitprop groups of the type seen in the Brecht-Ottwalt-Dudow film *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) (compare [Plates 12](#) and [13](#)).

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Maybe these ... [sic]

<sup>2</sup> ‘The human factor’ fetched the highest prices in the theatre during the decade in which people dug resolutely into the substance of the proletariat. And this human factor was wrung from human pain. The physical exploitation of the poor was followed by psychological exploitation. Those thespians who could ape the distress of the exploited in the most lifelike way got money thrown at them, earning twice the salary of a government minister, and the more deeply immersed the exploiters were in this exposition of their victims, the higher their social standing became. Disgust at the stink of the great unwashed was now mingled with a poignant sense of the author’s compassion. Of the whole range of human emotions, pain was the only one remaining. It was a cannibalistic drama.

<sup>3</sup> ‘It rang out in the valley but not on the mountain.’

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps we of the younger generation really don’t have what it takes to understand this state of affairs, particularly the addiction to experiences from which the fading bourgeoisie suffers – its pathological need to enrich itself through the experiences of others and wallow in the sorrow of every mother within reach. We do not use the theatre as a recruiting office for experiences we have never had.

<sup>5</sup> The producers are, however, completely dependent on the apparatus in economic and social terms, it has a monopoly on their impact, and increasingly the products of writers, composers and critics are taking on the character of raw materials: the finished product is manufactured by the apparatus.

<sup>6</sup> This narrow boundary did not prevent us from incorporating a direct, instructive dimension and organizing everything from a gestic point of view. The eye that aligns everything from a gestic point of view is morality. In other words, portrayal of manners. But done subjectively.

Now we’ll have another drink  
Then we won’t go home – yet  
Then we’ll have another drink  
Then we’ll have a break.

The people singing this song are subjective moralists. They are describing themselves!



- the people singing and being are subjective moralists. They are describing themselves.
- 7 Romanticism is a commodity here too, but appears merely as content and not as form.
  - 8 'A dignified gentleman who was apoplectic with rage had taken out a bunch of keys and was fighting against epic theatre for all he was worth. His wife did not abandon him at this momentous hour. The lady had put two fingers in her mouth, screwed up her eyes and blown out her cheeks. Her whistling drowned out the keys to the cash-register.' (A. Polgar on the premiere of the opera *Mahagonny* in Leipzig.)
  - 9 This table does not present absolute antitheses, but merely shifts of accent. Thus within the communicative process it is possible to prioritize emotional suggestibility or purely rational persuasion.
  - 10 On shifts of emphasis in acting techniques, see 'Dialogue on Acting'.
  - 11 The large number of craftsmen in operatic orchestras means that only associative music can be produced (one torrent of sound leads to another); and so the orchestral apparatus needs to be reduced to thirty specialists at most. The singer becomes a reporter, whose private feelings must remain a private matter.
  - 12 On the significance of 'titles', see the 'Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*' and footnote 1 to the *Threepenny* film.
  - 13 Innovations such as this are to be criticized as long as they simply serve to renovate institutions that have become obsolete. They constitute progress if there is an intention to carry out a fundamental *change in function* of these institutions. Then they represent quantitative improvements, acts of disencumbrance, purification processes, which only acquire their meaning from the change in function that has taken place or is about to. Real progress consists not in having progressed but in progressing. Real progress consists in whatever enables or compels us to progress. And, at the same time, activating connected categories on a broad front. Real progress is caused by the untenability of an actual state of affairs and entails its alteration.
  - 14 Life as it is imposed on us is too hard for us, it brings us too much in the way of pain, disappointment, insoluble problems. If life is to be bearable, then we cannot do without palliatives. There are perhaps three main types: powerful distractions that cause us to play down our misery, vicarious gratifications that reduce it, narcotics that make us insensitive to it. Something of this sort is essential. The vicarious gratifications offered by art are illusions when compared to reality, but no less effective psychologically because of that, thanks to the role imagination has developed in our mental life. (Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 22) Such narcotics are sometimes responsible for the dissipation of large amounts of energy that could be used to improve the human lot. (Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 28) [These page references are Brecht's, and therefore to a German edition.]
  - 15 In the case of *Mahagonny*, we have in mind those innovations that enable the theatre to put on portrayals of manners (revealing the commodity character of pleasure and of those who indulge in pleasure), and those that produce the spectator's moral standpoint.
  - 16 Cf. *Versuch 5*, 'On Opera'.

## Part Two

# Exile Years

### Introduction to Part Two

If the selections in [Part One](#) offer evidence of the gradual development of Brecht's thinking about the theatre from anti-illusionism and the critique of representational realism of the early twenties to explorations of a new kind of theatre in the context of his sometimes contradictory Marxism of the early thirties, then [Part Two](#) gathers texts, many unpublished at the time, from his years of exile. Not surprisingly, the exile situation, which imposed on the playwright an anxiety-ridden separation from his audience and cultural context in Germany, also yielded time, the time to examine his ideas and plays of that earlier period. Moving from a hostile and antithetical understanding of bourgeois theatre and society, now Brecht begins to address the issue of how to anchor a new theatre in a new society from a more dialectical, synthesizing perspective, an issue that will concern him for the rest of his life. Whereas prior to 1933 he spilled a lot of ink explaining what he was against, in the uncertainty of exile he mapped out a vision of his future theatre with new and refined terms like '*Verfremdung*', '*gestus*' and '*historicization*'. The selection of texts in [Part Two](#) is subdivided into three sections that reflect both the diversity of his concerns and – in their overlapping dates of production – the way in which they inspired each other.

Brecht left Germany the day after the Reichstag fire in February 1933 and settled in Denmark, just outside of Svendborg, where he stayed until April 1939, when the threat of war and a Nazi invasion drove him and his family first to Sweden, then to Finland in 1940 and finally to California via the Soviet Union in 1941. While most of the selections in [Part Two](#) were written during the years in Scandinavia, many were published years later after Brecht had returned to Europe in late 1947. Adjusting to the shock of fleeing Germany, the second phase of Brecht's theoretical development set in, during which he elaborated a more sophisticated 'theory' of epic theatre, drawing not only on his experiences

with less than satisfying productions of his plays but also on his watershed visit to Moscow in 1935, where he met literary scholar and writer Sergei Tretiakov and the Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang. No longer in a position to generate theatrical experiments with a view to changing the means of cultural production, Brecht focused his attention on questions of dramatic form and function, trying to establish a theoretical framework that would be sophisticated enough to hold up against Stanislavsky's method, a rival whom he saw as increasingly influential. If it seems that he had become less political, there were two good reasons. His unorthodox Marxism put him in a difficult position vis-à-vis anti-fascist communists in the Soviet Union that hardly allowed for radical criticism, and one of the conditions of exile in any case was to refrain from political activity.

The first section includes Brecht's ruminations on why the old kind of empathetic theatre no longer functions in a modern, complex society and on what his new kind of experimental theatre offers in its place. Comparing the dramatic versus epic theatre scheme from the 1930 notes on *Mahagonny* (see [Part One](#)) with its substantial revision in 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction' of 1935 indicates his evolving thoughts. Read horizontally, it explains what epic theatre is not, yet does so less antithetically and more gradationally than in the earlier version, where simplifying juxtapositions lent themselves better to the tabular schematic form. The omissions, additions and regrouping of characteristics in the 1935 version diminish the focus on structural aspects in favour of performance matters and the political rationale behind them. No longer is Brecht concerned with opera and the culinary but with the relationship between entertainment and didacticism, specifically their dialectical relationship deriving from the enjoyment that comes with learning. His defence of epic theatre as both entertaining and instructive, rather than mutually exclusive, allows for detachment and emotions, and the essay goes on to mention structural as well as non-structural means for achieving them, means that Brecht will return to and elaborate in his later notes on Stanislavsky (see [Part Three](#)). These include a move from the drama of action to the theatre of narrating events, where not only dialogue but also non-verbal staging aspects such as props, decor, sound effects and lighting contribute to the plot. Significantly, Brecht deletes now the contrastive pairing scheme of feeling/rationality in the 1930 scheme and proceeds to defend the role of emotions, as he will continue to do for the next twenty-five years, attempting to differentiate between various kinds of emotions but also between rationality, intelligence and common sense as features of the epic theatre.

Soon Brecht was planning his first trip for mid-October, 1935, to New York

City on the occasion of the production of *The Mother* by the Theatre Union, the first of his plays to be produced in North America. He authored several texts aimed at explaining how he developed his approach, including 'On Experiments in the Epic Theatre' and 'The German Drama: pre-Hitler'. The former defines the context of experimental theatre in the Weimar Republic, especially that of Erwin Piscator, because it brought new material and content on to the stage (i.e. the masses, oil production, industrial conflicts). The latter, intended as Brecht's calling card for the United States, was published in the *New York Times* culture section in November, five days after the premiere of *The Mother*. The prominent use of the neologism 'non-Aristotelian' is noteworthy, a term he introduced in 'The *Threepenny* Lawsuit' (see *Brecht on Film and Radio*, pp. 157–99) that was eventually superseded by another neologism, *Verfremdung*.

As made clear in his notes to the New York production of *The Mother* (see [Part One](#)), Brecht rejected the conventions of theatrical illusionism that characterized this failed realization of his play, and in a number of subsequent essays he began to reflect on the reasons for it. In 'On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre', revised after his trip to New York City, he reprised the Weimar experiments in order to explicate the sociological aspects he had detailed in the notes on *Mahagonny*, even drawing verbatim from them to insist that 'non-narcotic' music, like that composed by Hanns Eisler for *The Mother*, has a specific function in the epic theatre. 'Short List of the Most Frequent, Common and Boring Misconceptions about Epic Theatre' and 'The Progressiveness of the Stanislavsky System' register Brecht's response to the prominence of Stanislavsky's acting method, confronted not only in New York City but also in the critical comments about his epic theatre from fellow exiles in the Soviet Union, where Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre enjoyed a privileged status. Both essays remained unpublished, but both document his concern with epic acting as an alternative to contemporary Aristotelian theatre.

By spring 1939, the drums of war were already perceptible, and Brecht needed to prepare for the eventuality of leaving Denmark, an immediate neighbour of Nazi Germany, for a more distant refuge. 'On Experimental Theatre', one of his most important reconceptualizations of the historical significance of epic theatre, was conceived as a lecture and then delivered to audiences in Stockholm and Helsinki. Like the earlier article in the *New York Times*, this self-advertisement presents a critical overview of modern German theatre as well as a lucid account of his own experiments. Beginning with the advances of Naturalism and its commitment to objectivity, he reviews a series of impasses related to empathy in all forms of conventional theatre: empathy assumes theatre can establish an autonomous realm with no necessary relation to reality; it binds the audience to

the false consciousness of the characters on stage; and it makes it impossible to empathize with human beings who are changeable and changing. Brecht then presents epic theatre as the logical response to the crisis of modern theatre and proposes key epic concepts – *Verfremdung*, historicization and experiment – to replace empathy. Returning to the need to balance entertainment and instruction, as suggested in the first essay of this section, he now presents specific techniques of *Verfremdung*; to counter the essentializing of bourgeois theatre, historicization shows that human beings can change; and the insistence on experiments appeals metaphorically to the objectivity of the scientific experiment rather than pointing to ideologically driven argument as the goal of the new theatre. The retreat from the idea of theatre as political intervention was undoubtedly occasioned by Sweden’s neutrality and Finland’s fear of the Soviet Union at this critical juncture on the eve of the Second World War. Finally, the later comment from 1944, ‘A Short Private Lecture for My Friend Max Gorelik’, articulates even more sharply the political and aesthetic shortcomings of conventional theatre, this time in response to what Brecht saw as Gorelik’s ‘backsliding’ from more advanced positions he promoted in his 1940 book on the ‘new theatre’ (see Brecht’s note of 12 June 1944, on a meeting with Gorelik in Los Angeles in *Journals*, p. 316).

The second section includes mostly unpublished notes and sketches about *Verfremdung* and *gestus* as Brecht began to develop their characteristics, some referring to his own experiments and others to everyday life or different cultural contexts, specifically to Chinese theatre. Like the texts in the first section, they document a substantial reformulation of epic theatre during the second half of the 1930s, but here the focus is less on textual estrangement and more on pragmatic aspects such as the role of the actor and staging devices. Convinced that illusion and empathy had no place in the new theatre, the ‘theorist’ Brecht saw that he would have to compete with Stanislavsky’s psychological realism to create an equally persuasive ‘technique’ or ‘system’; hence, many of the ideas in these texts will be condensed and/or recycled in the next decade in the *Short Organon* (see [Part Three](#)) or *Messingkauf/Buying Brass* (see *Brecht on Performance*).

The encounter with Mei Lan-fang in Moscow in spring 1935 was a catalyst to begin thinking about how conventions and tradition can be mediated and changed, as registered in the two short notes ‘On the Art of Spectatorship’ and ‘Maintaining Gestures over Multiple Generations’. In Chinese theatre both the spectator and actor see the character as an object whose actions or attitudes are externalized and therefore open to stylization and manipulation. ‘*Verfremdung* Effects in Chinese Acting’, published in English translation in 1936 (with the

misleading translation of *Verfremdung* as ‘disillusion’), goes a step further. Brecht positions Chinese opera – its stylized acting and attention to detail – against empathy and parallel to epic acting and then proceeds to infuse it with his own analytical terms. Indeed, this seminal essay documents his very first usage of *Verfremdung* and V-effects, reflecting the variable meanings of a process to estrange events on stage, specific estranging devices and an estranging effect on the audience as a result of ‘making something strange’ on stage. Interestingly, he does not invoke the Chinese analogue to discuss the term ‘historicization’ but rather American theatre (i.e. Piscator’s stage adaptation of Dreiser’s novel *An American Tragedy*) in order to explain how the present can be historicized to show that human beings can change. Only the actor’s careful choice of the telling detail and its *Verfremdung* will make visible the detail’s historical significance to the audience for critical inspection. While historicization will later be tied to a dialectical materialist conception of history, here it is understated, even temperate in its implications, probably owing to the conditions of exile. Moreover, at this point the relationship between *Verfremdung* and historicization remains elusive and will only later emerge in the notes on dialectical theatre (see [Part Three](#)).

Following this important position paper, Brecht authored a series of texts over the next year that featured practical examples of *Verfremdung* and *gestus* both in the form of tips for actors and of functions beyond a theatrical device. Three short notes on the Dutch Renaissance painter Pieter Breughel the Elder show how his work inspired the newly coined term *Verfremdung*. The detailed gestures reveal how the significant or pregnant moment he captured in these narrative paintings can visually convey the *gestus* and attitudes of the figures. Brecht was also fascinated by their realism, moulding some of his own dramatic characters like Mother Courage and Grusche in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* on a particular picture. The two notes on the ‘Zero Point’ are among the various texts about the inductive method for preparing a role, a strategy aimed at avoiding empathy and thus within the broader reaction to Stanislavsky’s acting method. The ‘Notes on *Pointed Heads and Round Heads*’, written in response to the Copenhagen production in 1936, includes diverse proposals about staging a non-Aristotelian drama: how to conceive of the social point of view for each role, how to distinguish between empathy and appealing to the audience’s emotions, how to use masks and sound for V-effects and so on. ‘On the Production of the V-effect’ echoes the definition presented in ‘*Verfremdung* Effects in Chinese Acting’ but introduces the specific example of baking bread in *Señora Carrar’s Rifles*.

While composer Kurt Weill was the first to articulate a definition of ‘gestic

music' in his collaboration on the opera *Mahagonny*, in 'On Gestic Music' Brecht proposes that the performance of the social gestus corresponds to making social realities visible, a position derived from the idea that gestus refers to the actor's activity of showing specific attitudes that the characters assume toward one another. In other contexts he will refer variously not only to gestic music, but also to gestic content, the gestic realm and gestic language, the last seen in the essay 'On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms'. In fact, while gestus became a point of reference in his practical work for the theatre already around 1930, he actually wrote about it more extensively only in the context of developing a general category for art and language in this foundational essay of 1938. Here Brecht is arguing not only that the social gestus is to be understood as a typical, recognizable form of behaviour relevant for producing social analysis in the theatre, but gestus also produces through language and word order an aesthetic image of the functional laws of a society. Equally important, in this essay we witness the artist Brecht – who was always careful about expressing disagreement with the Soviet leadership – defending his 'modernism' against claims of formalism by those anti-fascist colleagues who were propagating Socialist Realism during the Stalinist terror of the 1930s. 'Street Scene' presents an extended example of *Verfremdung* in an everyday situation from working-class life, a car accident on a city street. Brecht's intention is to show that *Verfremdung* is not only an aesthetic phenomenon in the theatre; the calm reconstruction of the accident has practical social meaning and can lead to social critique, but it also suggests the preparation necessary for the epic actor before the reading of the script and the collective rehearsal on stage. To this extent, the essay – with its subtitle 'A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre' – represents a counterargument to Stanislavsky's street accident in *An Actor Prepares* (1936).

If 'On Experimental Theatre' and '*Verfremdung* Effects in Chinese Acting' represent major contributions to the theorization of epic theatre, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting that Produces a *Verfremdung* Effect' is Brecht's last major statement to clarify his approach before his arrival in the United States in 1941, although it was not published until 1951. The tone suggests that it is targeted at a knowledgeable audience who already appreciates the claims of epic theatre. Consequently it focuses on specifics and the responsibilities of the actor, proposing rehearsal and preparation techniques and referencing almost exclusively Brecht's own work – both dramatic and theoretical – in the numbered glosses. The principle of *Verfremdung* is explained with innocuous examples to show that theatre models and everyday behaviour can be juxtaposed. Gestus becomes an analytical concept that enables the actor

to separate into single gestures social actions and appearances in order to contrast them with one another and reveal a set of social relations. The ‘not–but’ is introduced as a means for the actor to ‘fix’ or ‘freeze’ the alternatives that may be communicated, that is, the models of audience reaction that may be actualized in a performance. And the concluding glosses (17, 18, 19) contain patient explanations of *Verfremdung* and historicization that are more sociopolitical than aesthetic in orientation. The last three brief texts in this section, all written within a year of ‘Short Description’, complement its positions with comments on practical training for *gestus* (‘Athletic Training’), on the dialectical conception of history as change (‘On Epic Dramatic Art: Change’) and the inductive method for preparing a role to prevent empathy in the theatre (‘On the Gradual Approach to the Study and Construction of the Figure’).

The final section of [Part Two](#) gathers together several essays written between 1938 and 1940 that once again address the topic of realism and class perspective. Already in the early 1930s Brecht had begun to formulate a critique of conventional or bourgeois realism in ‘The *Threepenny* Lawsuit’ (see *Brecht on Film and Radio*) because, he argued, in the complex world of advanced capitalism a mirror of surface reality cannot expose the structures or relations of power that make it function. Now he turns once again to the problem of realism within the political situation and theoretical debates about ‘formalism in the arts’ being played out in left-wing circles faced with the threat of fascism on the one hand and Stalinism on the other.

‘The Popular and the Realistic’ – along with ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode’ and ‘Notes on the Realist Mode of Writing’, both in Part Four of *Brecht on Art and Politics* – belongs to Brecht’s reflections on how to break the hold of identification and empathy between audience and work of art or individual and author. The widespread (mis)use of the German words *Volk* (‘people’) and *volkstümlich* (‘popular’) on the part of the Nazis for their racial politics, as well as the split of the German working class between the left and the right in the waning years of the Weimar Republic, threw into question notions of how art and what kind of art could appeal to the masses. Here Brecht argues once again that injecting socialist content into nineteenth-century bourgeois art was anachronistic and simply extended the idea of the individual, bourgeois subject as a vehicle of audience identification rather than promoting new forms and new aesthetic devices to intervene in the political and historical process. Hence, he defends an approach to realism that is radically anti-empathic, not motivated by an individual’s character or subjective, inner life but focused on typical aspects of external behaviour. This new kind of realism enables the audience to recognize causal relationships inductively and to adopt a critical



perspective on observable social reality. If the audience can see that human beings are conditioned by specific societal relationships, then they will also understand that the relationships, that is society, can be changed.

The last essays in this section emerge from Brecht's transitional exile in Sweden and Finland and reprise issues addressed in other contexts. His comments on amateur actors are a symptom of the reality of the extended exile situation – for years the playwright no longer had access to professional theatres – but they also register the conviction that theatre is related to the everyday reality of the working masses, as already explicated in 'Street Scene' and 'Short Description' (see above). 'The Attitude of the Rehearsal Director (in the Inductive Process)' replicates for the theatre director the techniques of experimentation and 'trying out' possible effects that were detailed in several of the texts about the actor's preparation of the role. The longer essay on the folk play is a direct result of his adaptation in Finland of the comedy *Puntila and His Man Matti*, defending the status of the folk tradition as a literary genre. More important, however, is the discussion of elevated style, which even in a comedy can be used to portray the 'common life' as noble and beautiful. In other words, realistic acting is a style in its own right for both serious and comic plays, returning to Brecht's argument that theatre must evolve with the new kind of dramatic writing needed for the new reality.

## Old versus New Theatre

### Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction

A few years back, anybody talking about modern theatre meant the theatre in Moscow, New York and Berlin. Someone might have mentioned a production by Jouvet in Paris or by Cochran in London, or *The Dybbuk* as given by the Habima (which is to all intents and purposes part of the Russian theatre, because Vakhtangov was its director). But broadly speaking there were only three capitals as far as modern theatre was concerned.

Russian, American and German theatres differed widely from one another, but were alike in being modern, that is to say in introducing technical and artistic innovations. In a sense they even achieved a certain stylistic resemblance, probably because technology is international (not just the part that is directly required for the stage but also the part that influences it, film for instance), and because large progressive cities in large industrial countries were involved. Most recently, the Berlin theatre seemed to have taken the lead. For a time everything that is common to the modern theatre found its strongest and, for the moment, most mature expression there.

The Berlin theatre's last phase was the so-called *epic theatre*, and it showed the modern theatre's developmental trend in its purest form. Whatever was labelled topical theatre [*Zeitstück*] or Piscator theatre or learning play [*Lehrstück*] belongs to the epic theatre.

#### *The epic theatre*

The term 'epic theatre' seemed self-contradictory to many people because, following Aristotle, the epic and dramatic forms of presenting the plot are held to be basically distinct. The difference between the two forms was never thought to lie simply in the fact that the one was performed by living beings while the other made use of a book; epic works such as those of Homer and the medieval singers were likewise theatrical performances, and dramas such as Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred* admittedly achieved their greatest effect as books. Thus Aristotle himself distinguished between the dramatic and epic forms as a difference in their construction, and their laws were dealt with under two different branches of aesthetics. The method of construction depended on the

different ways of presenting the work to the public, sometimes on the stage, sometimes through a book; and independently of that there was the 'dramatic element' in epic works and the 'epic element' in dramatic works. The bourgeois novel in the last century developed much that was 'dramatic', which meant the strong centralization of plot, a mutual dependency of the separate parts. A certain passion of utterance, an emphasis on the clash of forces are hallmarks of the 'dramatic'. The epic writer Döblin provided an excellent description when he said that the epic, as opposed to the dramatic, can, as it were, be cut with a scissors into single pieces that all remain viable.

This is not the place to explain how the opposition of epic and dramatic lost its rigidity after the two had long been held to be irreconcilable. Let us just point out that the technical advances alone were enough to permit the stage to incorporate narrative elements in its dramatic productions. The possibility of using projections, the greater adaptability of the stage due to mechanization, film, all completed the stage's equipment, and did so at a point where the most important transactions between people could no longer be shown simply by personifying the forces that moved them or subjecting the characters to invisible metaphysical powers. To make these transactions intelligible, the *surroundings* in which the people lived had to be brought to bear in a big and 'significant' way.

These surroundings had of course been shown in existing drama, but only as seen from the main character's point of view and not as an independent element. They arose from the hero's reactions to them. They were seen as a storm is seen when we see the ships on the surface of the water unfolding their sails, and the sails filling out. In epic theatre the surroundings were to appear independently.

*The stage began to tell a story.* The narrator was no longer missing along with the fourth wall. Not only did the backdrop adopt an attitude to the events on the stage – by recalling on large screens other events that were occurring elsewhere simultaneously, by projecting documents that confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by providing concrete and tangible statistics for abstract conversations, by supporting vivid events whose meaning was unclear with facts and figures – and the actors too refrained from throwing themselves completely into their roles, remaining detached from the characters they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of them.

The spectator was no longer allowed in any way to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the events shown and put them through a process of alienation [*Entfremdung*]: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When things are 'self-evident',

we dispense with understanding.

What is 'natural' had to have the force of what is *startling*. This was the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People's activity had to simultaneously be as *it was* and be capable of being different.

These were great changes.

[Editor's note: The table below is the 1936 version, a reworking of the 1930 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*' (see [Part One](#)); the lines between slashes (/ /) are editorial revisions made in 1938 for Brecht's collected works (*Gesammelte Werke*).]

### *Two Schemes*

A few short schemes can show what distinguishes epic from dramatic theater.

1.

*Dramatic form*

The stage 'portrays' an incident

*Epic form*

It narrates an incident

Involves spectators in an action

Turns them into observers but

consumes their activity



arouses their activity

enables them to have feelings

forces them to make decisions

communicates experiences

Spectators are immersed in an incident

communicates knowledge

Spectators are put in opposition to it

Suggestion is used

Arguments are used and

Emotions are preserved

are turned into insights

Human nature presumed to be common knowledge

Human nature is object of investigation



Humankind is unchangeable  
/ eyes on the finish /  
/ one scene makes another /  
Events move in a straight line

Humankind is changeable and able to change things  
/ eyes on the course /  
/ each scene for itself /

in curves

Natura non facit saltus  
[nature makes no leaps]

facit saltus [nature makes  
leaps]

The world as it is

the world as it is becoming

What humankind should do

What humankind can do

/What humankind must do /

Its drives

its motives

/ thought determines being /

/ social being determines thought /

2.

*The dramatic theatre's spectator says:*

Yes, I have felt like that too. – Just like me. – It's only natural. – It'll never change. – This person's suffering shocks me, because there is no way out. – That's great art: everything is self-evident – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

*The epic theatre's spectator says:*

I'd never have thought so. – That's not the way. – That's extraordinary, hardly believable. – It's got to stop – This person's suffering shocks me, because there might be a way out. – That's great art: nothing is self-evident. – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

*The theatre of instruction*

The stage began to be instructive.

Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat-packing industry, all became subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses enlightened the spectators about facts they did not know. Films showed a montage of events from all over the world. Projections added statistical material. And as the 'background' came to the fore, people's action was subjected to criticism. Right and wrong courses of action were shown. People were shown who knew what they were doing, and others who did not. The theatre became an affair for philosophers, at any rate the sort of philosophers who wished not just to explain the world but also to change it. So we had philosophy, and we had instruction. And where was the amusement in all that? Were they sending us back to school, treating us like illiterates? Were we supposed to pass exams and be given marks?

There is a general perception that a very sharp distinction exists between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful, but only the second is pleasant. So we have to defend the epic theatre against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair.

Well, we can only say that the contrast between learning and amusing oneself does not necessarily exist in nature; it has not always existed and need not always exist.

Undoubtedly there is much that is tedious about the kind of learning familiar to us from school, from our professional training, *etc.* But let us recall under what conditions and to what end it takes place. That kind of learning is really a



purchase. Knowledge is just a commodity. It is acquired in order to be resold. All those who have grown too old for school have to do their learning virtually in secret, for anyone who admits that he still has something to learn devalues himself as a person who knows too little. Moreover the usefulness of learning is very much limited by factors outside the learner's control. There is unemployment, for instance, which no knowledge protects against. There is the division of labour, which makes comprehensive knowledge unnecessary and impossible. Learning is often among the concerns of those who see no other possibility of getting ahead. There is not much knowledge that leads to power, but plenty of knowledge to which only power can lead.

Learning has a very different function for different social strata. There are people who consider learning to be worthless because there is no prospect for them to utilize what they learn. No one asks them about whatever clever answers they may know. Whatever happens to oil – it's alright, so much the better! If not, what are they supposed to do about it? But there are also people who cannot imagine any improvement in conditions; the conditions are good enough for them. Whatever happens to the oil, they will profit from it. And they feel the years beginning to tell. There can't be all that many years left. What is the point of learning a lot now? They have said their final word: a grunt. But there are also people who have not yet 'had their turn', who are discontented with conditions, who have an immense practical interest in learning, who want orientation at all costs, and who know they are lost without learning; these are the best and keenest learners. Similar differences apply to countries and peoples. Thus the pleasure of learning depends on all sorts of things; but none the less there is such a thing as pleasurable learning, militant and cheerful learning.

If learning could not provide this kind of amusement, the theatre's whole structure would be unfit for instruction.

Theatre remains theatre, even when it is theatre for instruction, and to the extent that it is good theatre, it will amuse.

### *Theatre and science*

'But what does science have to do with art? We know that science can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre.'

I have often been told, when pointing out the invaluable services that modern science, if properly applied, can perform for art and especially for the theatre, that art and science are two estimable but wholly distinct fields of human activity. This is a terrible truism, of course, and we might as well agree quickly that, like most truisms, it is perfectly true. Art and science work in quite different ways: agreed. But, bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get along as

an artist without the use of certain sciences. This may well arouse serious doubts as to my artistic abilities. People are used to seeing poets as unique and slightly unnatural beings who recognize with a truly godlike assurance things that other people can only recognize after much sweat and toil. It is naturally distasteful to have to admit that one does not belong to this select band. All the same, it must be admitted. It must at the same time be made clear that the scientific efforts to which I just confessed are not excusable side interests, pursued in the evening after a day's work. We all know how Goethe was interested in natural science, Schiller in history: as a kind of hobby, it is charitable to assume. I have no wish simply to accuse these two of having needed these sciences for their poetic activity, nor would I use them to excuse myself; but I must say that I do need the sciences. And I must even admit that I look askance at all sorts of people who I know do not keep abreast of scientific understanding: that is to say, who sing as the birds sing, or as people imagine the birds to sing. This does not mean that I would reject a charming poem about the taste of flounder or the pleasure of a boating party just because the writer had not studied gastronomy or navigation. But in my view the great and complicated things that go on in the world of humankind cannot be seen adequately for what they are by people who do not use every possible resource for understanding.

Let us suppose that we have to show great passions or great events that influence the fates of peoples. Today we view the drive for power as such a passion. Supposing that a poet 'feels' this drive and wants to have someone strive for power, how is he to show the exceedingly complicated machinery within which the struggle for power takes place today? If his hero is a politician, how do politics work? If he is a business man, how does business work? And then there are the poets who are much less passionately interested in any individual's drive for power than in business affairs and politics as such! How are they to acquire the necessary knowledge? They are unlikely to learn enough by going round and keeping their eyes open, although even that would provide more than they would get by just rolling their eyes in a fine frenzy. The founding of a paper like the *Völkischer Beobachter* or a business like Standard Oil is a pretty complicated affair, and no one just lets you in on the secrets. One important field for the playwright is psychology. It is taken for granted that a poet, if not an ordinary man, must be able without further instruction to discover the motives that lead a man to commit murder; he must have the 'inner resources' to give a picture of a murderer's mental state. It is taken for granted that you only have to look inside yourself in such a case; and then there's always imagination .... There are various reasons why I can no longer surrender to this agreeable hope of getting a result quite so comfortably. I can no longer find in

myself all those motives that the press or scientific reports show to have been observed in people. Like the average judge when pronouncing sentence, I cannot without further ado conjure up an adequate picture of a murderer's mental state. Modern psychology, from psychoanalysis to behaviourism, provides me with insights that lead me to judge the case quite differently, especially if I bear in mind the findings of sociology and do not overlook economics and history. You will say: but that's getting complicated. I have to answer that it *is* complicated. Even if you let yourself be convinced, and agree with me that a large slice of literature is exceedingly primitive, you may still ask with profound concern: won't an evening in such a theatre be a most alarming affair? The answer to that is: no.

Whatever knowledge is contained in a poetic work must be wholly transformed into poetry. The realization of this knowledge fulfils the very pleasure that the poetic element provokes. And even if it does not provide the pleasure found in science, a certain inclination to penetrate deeper into things and a desire to make the world controllable are necessary to ensure the enjoyment of poetic works generated by this age of great discoveries and inventions.

*Is epic theatre a sort of 'moral institution'?*

According to Friedrich Schiller the theatre is supposed to be a moral institution. In making this demand, it really never occurred to Schiller that by moralizing from the stage he might drive the audience out of the theatre. In his day audiences had no objection to moralizing. It was only later that Friedrich Nietzsche attacked him for blowing a moral trumpet. To Nietzsche any concern with morality was a cheerless affair; to Schiller it seemed thoroughly enjoyable. He knew of nothing that could give greater amusement and satisfaction than the propagation of ideals. The bourgeoisie was setting about forming the ideas of the nation. Putting your house in order, showing off your new hat, submitting your invoices for payment – all are very agreeable. But having to describe the sale of your house, sell your old hat, pay your bills – all are cheerless affairs, and that was how Friedrich Nietzsche saw things a century later. He was poorly disposed towards morality, and thus towards the previous Friedrich too. Many people also attacked the epic theatre, claiming it was too moralistic. Yet in the epic theatre moral arguments took only second place. Its aim was less to moralize than to study. That is to say, it did study, but then came the rub: the story's moral. Of course we cannot pretend that we began to study just for the fun of it and without any more practical motive, only to be completely taken by surprise with the results. Undoubtedly there were some painful discrepancies in our surroundings,

conditions that were barely tolerable, and this not merely on account of moral considerations. Hunger, cold and hardship are hard to bear not only on account of moral considerations. Similarly the object of our inquiries was not just to arouse moral objections to such conditions (even if they could easily be felt – although not by all audience members; such objections were seldom felt, for instance, by those who profited by the conditions in question!), but also to discover means for their elimination. We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in the name of the wronged. These truly are two distinct matters, for the wronged are often told that they must put up with their lot, for moral reasons. For such moralists people exist for morality, not morality for people.

At least it should be possible to deduce from the above to what degree and in what sense the epic theatre is a moral institution.

### *Can epic theatre be performed anywhere?*

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theatre. In its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity it is related to ancient Asian theatre. Instructive/didactic tendencies are to be found in the medieval mystery plays and the classical Spanish theatre and also in the theatre of the Jesuits. These theatrical forms corresponded to particular trends of their time and vanished with them. Similarly the modern epic theatre is linked with certain trends. It cannot be practised universally by any means. Most of the great nations today are not disposed to use the theatre for ventilating their problems. London, Paris, Tokyo and Rome maintain their theatres for quite different purposes. Up to now favourable circumstances for an epic, instructive/didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time. In Berlin fascism put a very definite stop to the development of such a theatre.

It demands not only a certain technological level but a powerful movement in society that is interested in seeing vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution, and can defend this interest against every opposing tendency.

The epic theatre is the broadest and most far-reaching experiment in great modern theatre, and it has to overcome all the immense difficulties that confront all vital forces in the sphere of politics, philosophy, science and art.

[‘*Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater?*’, BFA 22/106-16]

Typescript, written about February/March 1935. This is Brecht’s first summary of the theatre for instruction and remained unpublished during his lifetime. Apparently he took the essay to Moscow in April of that year, perhaps in preparation for a conference of theatre producers to which

Piscator invited Brecht, and he gave it to Sergei Tretyakov there. The term translated here as 'alienation' is *Entfremdung*, as used by Hegel and Marx, and not the *Verfremdung* that Brecht himself was soon to coin and make famous (see the editors' introduction). The Latin phrase in the left-hand column of the scheme differentiating dramatic and epic theatre is from Aristotle's *Historia de animalibus*. Alfred Döblin, the friend of Brecht's referred to early in the essay, wrote *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (*The Three Leaps of Wang Lun*), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and other novels that critics of the time likened to Joyce and Dos Passos. He too was interested in the theory of epic form. The *Völkischer Beobachter* was the chief Nazi daily paper.

## On Experiments in Epic Theatre

### I

The advent of the Third Reich cut short the numerous experiments in Germany that we can best refer to from a technical standpoint as experiments in epic theatre. They were conducted primarily by Piscator and me, and in large public theatres.

The social function of the theatre was changing. Compared to before, it was almost like the difference between dancing and target practice.

The external form of the theatre as proscenium stage was preserved. But outside the theatres, proletarian troupes rehearsed slogans with the workers. And the *Lehrstück* removed the spectators and tolerated only practitioners.

The incursion happened simultaneously in the theatre, the opera, the revue and even the concert hall.

The difficulties in portraying modern subject matter could not be surmounted just by a technical revolution of either the stage or the art of acting.

I will give three examples.

We agonized for months – I say we, because a play was almost always put together by a whole team – over the portrayal of the first large American railroad construction projects. We had before us the history of the Erie Railroad, which we could read in Myers' *History of the Great American Fortunes*. Here an immense project that benefited the entire country had been built by criminals for the purpose of exploitation. Considering America's stage of development at the time, there was no other conceivable way of constructing a railroad line except for the purpose of exploitation and fraud. How was anyone supposed to portray

both sides of the venture, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’?

Another task was to portray how several scientists eliminated yellow fever, thus making the construction of the Panama Canal possible in the first place. Petty bourgeois solved that problem at about the same time as thousands of their class comrades in France were ruined in the notorious scandal. And the Canal wasn’t profitable and didn’t need to be profitable. istic purposes they represent? [The original is torn here.]

The third example: the portrayal of petroleum. We started with the discovery of its sources, a witches’ Sabbath of human meanness. Yes, there was great joy when the valuable liquid was discovered, but it was joy in theft; there was great hope – it was hope for fraud. We showed how the industrial and financial machine was geared up, a witches’ Sabbath. In the midst of the work one of us sank into restless brooding. ‘But that’s [text breaks off]

It was very hard for us to achieve a clear understanding. In our plays, the scenes in which the collective triumphed over the individual were the most successful. This was true for the bourgeois as well as for the proletarian part of the audience. Whenever the masses appeared on the screen in the background, the great actor on the stage disappeared completely from view. At the same time, I can clearly remember my amazement when I first heard Piscator talking – while he continued to work – about his experiences at the front. Nothing had depressed him in battle more than the fact that he as an individual was so completely effaced, just a number, a thing that threw itself into the muck on command, and then on command, or even without a command, just following the mass instinct of attacking troops, getting up out of the muck into the bullets’ path. Annoyed, I thought: a real individualistic liberal! But in reality an excellent instinct was guiding him: he sensed that this gathering of people could be a very terrible thing if its purpose did not benefit each individual member of the crowd. Here a horrible ideal emerged, the artificial collective that drew its unity from the fact that the interests of *all* were equally harmed – the fascist collective. Above it the slogan was already taking shape: Public welfare before private interest. Was that why the bourgeois audience cheered? These were not really very conscious actions. The dominant mode of production had gathered great masses for war and peace; the oppressed forces of production ardently posited the primacy of the collective. The bourgeoisie, taken by surprise at first, participated emotionally in such aspirations; this was already an ‘order of the day’, a dangerous order, but an order nonetheless. (In addition, one part of this bourgeois audience was involved in a struggle with other parts. Feudal property ownership still existed and had its power base in the secretive Reichswehr. No

surprise that the bourgeoisie broke into applause when they saw the masses of sailors throw their officers overboard in *Potemkin*! Commercial and industrial capital could not agree on national policy. The International does not recognize borders.) The truth was: the bourgeoisie was learning. It was learning everywhere, including with us. It was learning while the proletariat was learning. The proletariat must negotiate its affairs in the crosshairs of enemy guns, which is enormously difficult. We showed the emancipation of the individual in *The Soldier Schwejk* and in other plays. We showed how the real masses are assembled in *The Mother*. We could not yet show the great decisive transformation of the masses from the object of politics into its subject. Yes, our situation was difficult.

We marched separately for a time. Piscator turned his attention to the subject matter and revolutionized the stage. I was more concerned with individual persons, or more accurately: with their relationships, and I revolutionized the art of acting. The stage itself became actor and performer. The world burst in. Film dragged masses of material on to the stage. Petroleum and war as the producer of destruction introduced themselves to the audience (wheat, often announced, prepared for its entrance). Relationships among people were made transparent. Behind the 'natural' disorder of realistic human interactions, other disorders appeared that seemed less natural. The gestus of exploitation and of revolt against oppression was demonstrated. Propelled by powerful interests, people acted in a way that was more or less consciously methodical. Our efforts intermingled from the very beginning. We constantly changed the actors and even the stage, which had become an actor. A particular art of acting that was determined by its social and revolutionary function became visible in broad outlines on a similarly determined stage. Well supplied with experiences on the largest technically superb stages, we proceeded to the suburban meeting halls, while the bourgeoisie kept silent or bellowed for the public prosecutor. The press was already absent from the scene by the time the police stopped our last performances; they were teaching us about struggle outside the law. Our actors, who had learned continuously and improved, were now arrested. In a peculiar way, that was proof of their artistry.

[*'Über die Versuche zu einem epischen Theater'*, BFA 22/121-4]

Typescript, probably written in 1935, the text exists only in fragmentary form (pp. 1–10 and 14 are missing). Sergei Eisenstein's Soviet film *Battleship Potemkin* was first screened in Germany in April 1929.

## The German Drama: Pre-Hitler

The years after the World War saw the German theatre in a period of a great flowering. We had more great actors than at any other time. There were quite a number of prominent regisseurs, or directors, such as Reinhardt, Jessner, Engel and so on, who competed sharply and interestingly with one another. Almost all plays of world literature, from *Oedipus* to *Les Affaires sont les Affaires* [*Business Is Business*], from the Chinese *Chalk Circle* to Strindberg's *Fräulein Julia* [*Miss Julie*], could be played. And they were played.

Nevertheless, for us young people the theatre had one serious flaw. Neither its highly developed stage technique nor its dramaturgy permitted us to present on the stage the great themes of our times; as, for example, the building-up of a mammoth industry, the conflict of classes, war, the fight against disease and so on. These things could not be presented, at least not in an adequate manner. Of course, a stock exchange could be, and was, shown on the stage, or trenches, or clinics. But they formed nothing but effective background for a sort of sentimental 'magazine story' that could have taken place at any other time, although in the great periods of the theatre they would not have been found worthy of being shown on the stage. The development of the theatre so that it could master the presentation of modern events and themes, and overcome the problems of showing them, was brought about only with great labor.

One thing that helped solve the problem was the 'electrification' of the mechanics of staging plays. Within a few years after this problem of developing the modern stage had made itself felt among us, Piscator, who without doubt is one of the most important theatre men of all times, began to transform its scenic potentialities. He introduced a number of far-reaching innovations.

One of them was his use of the film and of film projections as an integral part of the settings. The setting was thus awakened to life and began to play on its own, so to speak; the film was a new, gigantic actor that helped to narrate events. By means of it documents could be shown as part of the scenic background, figures and statistics. Simultaneous events in different places could be seen together. For example, while a fight was going on between two characters for the possession of an Albanian oilfield, one could see on the screen in the background warships being launched in preparation for putting that oilfield out of commission entirely.

This was great progress. Another innovation was the introduction of moving platforms on the stage (they were an innovation in 1924; they have been used here now in America for the past few years). On these moving bands that



traversed the stage we played, for example, *Brave Soldier Schweik* and his famous march to Budweis, which took a half-hour and which was made great and entertaining by the actor Max Pallenberg. Pallenberg had to leave Germany at the beginning of the Third Reich and has since died. The elevator-stage on which *The Merchant of Berlin* was performed made vertical action on the stage possible. New facilities for staging allowed the use of musical and graphic elements which the theatre up to this time had not been able to employ. These inspired composers of rank to write music for the theatre. The great cartoonist George Grosz made valuable contributions for the projections. His drawings for the performance of *Schweik* were published by the Malik Press in Berlin.

We made many experiments. I can tell of some of my own work, as I know that best. We organized small collectives of specialists in various fields to 'make' the plays; among these specialists were historians and sociologists as well as playwrights, actors and other people of the theatre. I had begun to work upon theories and experiments in a non-Aristotelian drama. Some of the theories I have put down in fragments in the seven volumes of *Versuche* (English translation: 'Experiments'), which were published by the Gustav Kiepenheuer Press in Berlin. This dramaturgy does not make use of the 'identification' of the spectator with the play, as does the Aristotelian, and has a different point of view also towards other psychological effects a play may have on an audience, as, for example, towards the 'catharsis'. Catharsis is not the main object of this dramaturgy.

It does not make the hero the victim of an inevitable fate, nor does it wish to make the spectator the victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience in the theatre. In fact, it has as a purpose the 'teaching' of the spectator a certain quite practical attitude; we have to make it possible for him to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely 'entangled' in what is going on). Some of my plays of this type of dramaturgy are *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, *Mann ist Mann* [*Man Equals Man*] and *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*.

The non-Aristotelian dramaturgy also investigated the field of the opera. One result of this investigation was the opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which I wrote and to which Kurt Weill wrote the music. Theoretical comments concerning this opera may be found in the second volume of the *Versuche*. Another was *Dreigoschenoper*, *Threepenny Opera*, which again I wrote with Weill.

At the same time, the training of a whole generation of young actors for the new style of acting, the epic style, took place. Many of these worked with us in

various theatres in Berlin. The beginning of the Third Reich scattered these actors all over the world. Oskar Homolka and Fritz Kortner are in London, Carola Neher is in Moscow, and so are Alexander Granach and Ernst Busch. Helene Weigel is in Copenhagen, Peter Lorre is in Hollywood and London, Lotte Lenya (Mrs Kurt Weill) is in Zurich, and, I hear, will soon be in New York. Some of them played in the Berlin production of *The Mother*.

At this time, too, another series of experiments that made use of theatrical effects but that often did not need the stage in the old sense was undertaken and led to certain results. These led to the 'lehrstuecke', for which the nearest English equivalent I can find is the 'learning-play'.

*The Mother* is such a learning-play, and embodies certain principles and methods of presentation of the non-Aristotelian, or epic style, as I have sometimes called it; the use of the film projection to help bring the social complex of the events taking place to the forefront; the use of music and of the chorus to supplement and vivify the action on the stage; the setting forth of actions so as to call for a critical approach, so that they would not be taken for granted by the spectator and would arouse him to think; it became obvious to him which were right actions and which were wrong ones.

Briefly, the Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed). It is a common truism among the producers and writers of the former type of play that the audience, once it is in the theatre, is not a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob, which must be and can be reached only through its emotions; that it has the mental immaturity and the high emotional suggestibility of a mob. We have often seen this pointed out in treatises on the writing and production of plays. The latter theatre holds that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgements even in the theatre; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded.

With the learning-play, then, the stage begins to be didactic. (A word of which I, as a man of many years of experience in the theatre, am not afraid.) The theatre becomes a place for philosophers, and for such philosophers as not only wish to explain the world but wish to change it.

Thus there is philosophy, thus there is instruction – but where is the fun? Are we to be put again on the school bench, and treated as learners of our ABCs? Are we supposed to pass examinations and work for credits? It is generally thought that there is a great difference between learning and having fun. The first may be

useful, but only the latter is agreeable. I therefore have to defend this theatre against the suspicion that it is a humorless, yes, even awfully strenuous affair. Well, I can only say to that that there is not necessarily a difference between learning and having fun. Doubtless the sort of learning which we remember from our school days, from all those preparations for professions, is a most toilsome, wearying affair. But there is a learning that is full of joy, full of fun, a militant learning.

If there were not such entertaining learning, then the entire theatre would not be able to instruct. For theatre remains theatre even while it is didactic, and as long as it is good theatre it is also entertaining. In Germany, philosophers discussed these learning-plays, and plain people saw them and enjoyed them, and also discussed them.

I learned from these discussions. I feel myself I must still, must always, learn. From what I learned from the audiences that saw it, I rewrote *Mann ist Mann* [*Man Equals Man*] ten times, and presented it at different times in different ways – for example, in Darmstadt in 1926, at the Berlin Volksbühne in 1927, at the Berlin Staatstheater in 1929. In studying an interesting book we must ‘look back’, we reread passages in order to grasp them entirely, and so too in the theatre. Revisiting a play is like rereading a page of a book. Once we know the contents of it, we can judge more closely of its meaning, of its acting and so on. I would be glad if audiences here will revisit my play, and if they will tell me of their varying opinions, as happened in Germany. They will learn from this, and I will also enjoy learning from this experience of the playgoers.

For some years, in carrying out my experiments, I tried, with a small staff of collaborators, to work outside the theatre, which, having for so long been forced to ‘sell’ an evening’s entertainment, had retreated into too inflexible limits for such experiments; we tried a type of theatrical performance that could influence the thinking of all the people engaged in it. We worked with different means and in different strata of society. These experiments were theatrical performances meant not so much for the spectator as for those who were engaged in the performance. It was, so to speak, art for the producer, not art for the consumer.

I wrote, for example, plays for schools, and small operas. The *Jasager* [*He Said Yes*] was one of them. These plays could be performed by students. Another of these plays was *The Flight of the Lindberghs*, a play that called for the collaboration of the schools with the radio. The radio broadcast into the schools the accompanying orchestral music and solo parts, while the classes in the schools sang the choruses and did the minor roles. For this piece Hindemith and Weill wrote music. It was done at the Baden-Baden Music Festival in 1929. The

Baden learning-play, 'Experiment No. 7', is for men and women choruses, and uses also the film and clowns as performers. The music is by Hindemith. Experiment No. 12 was a learning-play, *Massnahme* [*The Decision*]. Several workers' choruses joined in performing it. The chorus consisted of 400 singers, while several prominent actors played the solo parts. The music was by Hanns Eisler.

I might add that the experiments that we undertook at the Nollendorf Theatre and at the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre alone cost more than half a million dollars, although some plays, like *Schweik*, had continuous runs of more than six months, and *Threepenny Opera* played for more than a year continuously, so much time and money indeed did the special machinery and the dramaturgical laboratories for these experiments need.

[From *The New York Times*, November 24, 1935, Section 9, p. 1 and 3]

This text was published only in English during Brecht's lifetime, presumably translated by Eva Goldbeck together with Brecht. This version preserves the American spelling, although misspelled names have been corrected; editor's additions are in brackets. The article also appeared in the London journal *Left Review* 10 (July 1936), 504–8. A partial German version, written in the third person and probably revised by Margarete Steffin, can be found in BFA 21/164-8. Brecht had arrived in New York in mid October 1935. An introductory note to the newspaper article reads: 'The author of the following adapted the Theatre Union's *The Mother* from the Gorki novel.' The production had opened five days earlier. Of the actors mentioned, Carola Neher – no relation of the designer Caspar Neher – disappeared with her husband in the USSR about 1938, where she died in prison. Alexander Granach went to Hollywood and died in May 1945. Ernst Busch was interned in France after taking part in the Spanish Civil War, was then handed over to the Nazis and put in a concentration camp. He returned to East Berlin and acted with the Deutsches Theater and (as guest artist) with the Berliner Ensemble. The *Chalk Circle* in Klabund's adaptation was produced by Rolf Roennecke in Hannover in January 1925; Walter Mehring's *Der Kaufmann von Berlin* (*The Merchant of Berlin*) by Piscator opened at the Theater am Nollendorfplatz on 3 September 1929, in a remarkable setting by Moholy-Nagy.

## **On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre**

As far as my own output goes,<sup>1</sup> the following plays involved application of

music to the epic theatre: *Drums in the Night*, *Life Story of the Man Baal*, *The Life of Edward II of England*, *Mahagonny*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Mother*, *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*.

In the first few plays music was used in a fairly conventional way; it was a matter of songs and marches, and there was usually some naturalistic pretext for each musical piece. All the same, the introduction of music meant a certain break with the dramatic conventions of the time: the drama was (as it were) lightened, made more elegant; the theatre's offerings took on a virtuoso character. The narrowness, dullness and tenacity of Impressionistic drama and the manic one-sidedness of Expressionist drama were to some extent offset by music, simply because it introduced variety. At the same time, music made possible something that we had long since ceased to take for granted, 'poetic theatre'. At first I wrote this music myself. Five years later, for the second Berlin production of the comedy *Man Equals Man* at the Staatstheater, Kurt Weill wrote it. From now on music had the characteristics of art (a value in and of itself). The play involved a certain amount of knockabout comedy, and Weill introduced 'eine kleine Nachtmusik' to accompany projections by Caspar Neher, also battle music and a song that was sung verse by verse during the visible changes of scene. But by then the first theories had already been put forward concerning *the separation of elements*.

The most successful demonstration of the epic theatre was the production of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928. This was the first use of theatrical music in accordance with a new point of view. Its most striking innovation lay in the strict separation of the music from all the other elements. Even outwardly this was evident from the fact that the small orchestra was installed visibly on the stage. For the singing of the songs the lighting was changed, the orchestra was lit up and the titles of the various numbers were projected on the screen at the back, for instance, 'Song of the insufficiency of human endeavour' or 'In a little song Polly gives her parents to understand that she has married the bandit Macheath'; and the actors changed their positions before the number began. There were duets, trios, solos and final choruses. The musical pieces, in which a balladlike quality predominated, were of a meditative and moralizing nature. The play showed the close relationship between the emotional life of the bourgeoisie and that of the criminal world. The criminals showed, sometimes through the music itself, that their sentiments, feelings and prejudices were the same as those of the average citizen and theatregoer. One theme was, broadly speaking, to show that the only pleasant life is an affluent one, even if this involves doing without certain 'higher things'. A love duet was used to argue that superficial circumstances like the social origins of partners or their economic status should

have no influence on a man's matrimonial decisions. A trio expressed concern at the fact that the uncertainties of life on this planet apparently prevent the human race from following its natural inclinations towards goodness and decent behaviour. The most tender and moving love-song in the play described the eternal, indestructible affection between a pimp and his moll. The lovers sang, not without emotion, of their little home, the brothel. In such ways the music, just because it adopted a purely emotional attitude and spurned none of the stock narcotic allures, worked at exposing middle class ideologies. It became, so to speak, a muckraker, a provocateur, a whistle-blower. These songs found a very wide public; catchwords from them cropped up in editorials and speeches. People sang them to piano accompaniment or with gramophone records, as they were used to doing with operetta hits.

This type of song was created on the occasion of the Baden-Baden Music Festival of 1927, where one-act operas were to be performed, when I asked Weill simply to write new settings for half-a-dozen already existing songs. Up to that time Weill had written relatively complicated music of a mainly psychological sort, and when he agreed to set a series of more or less banal song texts, he was making a courageous break with a stubbornly held prejudice of a solid majority of serious composers. The success of this attempt to apply modern music to the song was significant. What was the real novelty of this music, other than the hitherto unaccustomed use to which it was put?

The epic theatre is chiefly interested in the behaviour of people towards one another, *wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical)*. It works out scenes where people behave in a way that makes visible the social laws under which they are acting. For that we need to find workable definitions: that is to say, such definitions of the relevant processes as can be used in order to intervene in the processes themselves. The concern of the epic theatre is thus eminently practical. Human behaviour is shown as alterable, people as dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them. To give an example: a scene where three men are hired by a fourth for a specific illegal purpose (*Man Equals Man*) has to be shown by the epic theatre in such a way that it becomes possible to imagine the behaviour of the four men differently, that is, we might either imagine other political and economic conditions under which these men would be speaking differently, or else an attitude of the four men towards the actual conditions that would likewise allow them to speak differently. In short, the spectator is given the chance to criticize human behaviour from a social point of view, and the scene is played as a piece of history. The spectator should be put in a position to make comparisons about how humans behave. This means, from the aesthetic point of view, that the

actor's *gestus* becomes particularly important. The arts have to begin to cultivate the *gestus*. (Naturally this means socially significant gestures, not illustrative or expressive gestures.) The gestic principle takes over, as it were, from the principle of imitation.

This marks a great revolution in drama. The drama of our time still follows Aristotle's recipe for achieving what he calls catharsis (the spiritual cleansing of the spectator). In Aristotelian drama the plot leads the hero into situations where he reveals his innermost being. All the incidents shown have the object of driving the hero into spiritual conflicts. It is a possibly blasphemous but quite useful comparison to think of the burlesque shows on Broadway, where the public, with yells of 'Take it off!', forces the girls to expose their bodies more and more. The individual whose innermost being is thus driven into the open then, of course, comes to stand for Man with a capital M. Everyone (including every spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a performance of *Oedipus* you have for all practical purposes an auditorium full of little Oedipuses, an auditorium full of Emperor Joneses for a performance of *The Emperor Jones*. Non-Aristotelian drama would at all costs avoid bundling together the events portrayed and presenting the hero at the mercy of this inexorable fate, despite the beauty and significance of his reactions; on the contrary, it is precisely this 'fate' that it would study closely and reveal as human machinations.

This survey, springing from the examination of a few unpretentious songs, might seem rather far-reaching if these songs did not represent the (likewise quite unpretentious) beginnings of a different, up-to-date theatre, or the part that music is to play in such a theatre. This song music's character as a kind of gestic music can hardly be explained except by a survey to establish the social purpose of the innovations. To put it practically, gestic music is the music that allows the actor to exhibit a basic *gestus*. So-called 'cheap' music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta, has for some time been a sort of gestic music. 'Serious' music, however, still clings to lyricism, and cultivates individualistic expression.

The opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* showed the application of the new principles on a fairly large scale. I feel I should point out that in my view Weill's music for this opera is not purely gestic; but many parts of it are, enough anyway for it to represent a serious threat to the common type of opera, which in its current manifestations we can call the purely culinary opera. The theme of the opera *Mahagonny* is the culinary process itself; I have explained the reasons for this in my essay 'Notes on the Opera' in my *Versuch* No. 5. There you will also find an argument positing the impossibility of any renewal of the operatic medium in the capitalist countries, and explaining why. Any

innovations introduced merely lead to opera's destruction. Composers aiming to renew the opera are bound, like Hindemith and Stravinsky, to come up against the opera apparatus. [ ... ]\*

[Editor's note: At this point Brecht quotes the first section of 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*' in [Part One](#), pp. 61–2.]

The dangers that the apparatus can present were shown by the New York production of *The Mother*. Its political standpoint puts the Theatre Union in quite a different class from the theatres that had performed the opera *Mahagonny*. Yet the apparatus behaved exactly like a machine for simulating the effects of dope. It distorted not only the play but also the music as a result, and, broadly speaking, missed the didactic aim. Far more deliberately than in any other play of the epic theatre, the music in *The Mother* was designed to prompt in the spectator the critical attitude that has been outlined above. Eisler's music can by no means be called simple. As music it is relatively complicated, and I cannot think of any that is more serious. In a remarkable manner it makes possible a certain simplification of the toughest political problems, whose solution is a life and death matter for the working class. In the short piece that counters the accusation against communism as creating chaos, the music's friendly and explanatory gestus wins a hearing, as it were, for the voice of reason. The piece 'In praise of learning', which links the problem of learning with that of the working class's accession to power, is invested by the music with a heroic yet naturally cheerful gestus. Similarly the final chorus, 'In praise of dialectics', which might easily lend the effect of a purely emotional song of triumph, has been kept in the realm of the rational by the music. (It is a frequently recurring mistake to suppose that this – epic – kind of production simply does without all emotional effects: actually, emotions are only clarified in it, steering clear of subconscious origins and intoxicating no one.)

If you imagine that the severe, yet delicate and rational gestus conveyed by this music is unsuitable for a mass movement that has to face uninhibited force, oppression and exploitation, then you have misunderstood an important aspect of this fight. It is, however, clear that the effectiveness of this kind of music largely depends on how it is performed. If the actors themselves cannot realize the right gestus, then there is little hope that they will be able to carry out their task of stimulating particular attitudes in the spectator. Our working-class theatres need careful education and strict training if they are to master the tasks proposed here and exploit the possibilities offered to them. They in turn have to carry out a certain training of their public. It is very important to keep the production apparatus of the working-class theatre clear of the general drug traffic conducted by bourgeois show business.



For the play *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, which unlike *The Mother* is addressed to a 'wide' public and takes more account of purely entertainment considerations, Eisler wrote songs. This music too is in a certain sense philosophical. It too avoids narcotic effects, chiefly by linking the solution of musical problems to the clear and intelligible working out of the political and philosophical meaning of each poem.

All this surely goes to show what a difficult task it is for music to fulfil the demands of an epic theatre.

Most 'advanced' music today is still written for the concert hall. A single glance at the audiences who attend concerts is enough to show how impossible it is to make any political or philosophical use of music that produces such effects. We see entire rows of people transported into a peculiarly doped state, wholly passive, self-engrossed, seemingly the victims of severe poisoning. Their vacant, gaping gaze shows that these people are the helpless and involuntary victims of their unchecked emotions. Trickle of sweat prove how such excesses exhaust them. The worst gangster film treats its audience more like thinking beings. Music is cast in the role of Fate. As the exceedingly complex, wholly unanalysable fate of this period of the most gruesome, deliberate exploitation of man by man. Such music has nothing but purely culinary ambitions left. It seduces the listener into an act of enjoyment that is enervating because it is unproductive. No number of refinements can convince me that its social function is any different from that of the Broadway burlesques.

We should not overlook the fact that among the more serious composers a reaction against this demoralizing social function has already set in. The experiments being made within the musical field have taken on considerable proportions; the new music is doing all it can not only in the treatment of purely musical material but also in attracting new consumer groups. And yet there is a whole series of problems that it has not yet been able to solve and whose solution it has not yet even tackled. The art of setting epics to music, for instance, is wholly lost. We do not know to what sort of music the *Odyssey* and *Nibelungenlied* were performed. The performance of narrative poems of any length is something that our composers can no longer render possible. Educational music is also in the doldrums; and yet there were times when music could be used to treat disease! Our composers on the whole leave any observation of the effects of their music to the café proprietors. One of the few actual pieces of research I have come across in the last ten years was the statement of a Paris restaurateur about the different orders his customers placed under the influence of different types of music. He claimed to have noticed that specific drinks were always consumed to the works of specific composers. And

it is perfectly true that the theatre would benefit greatly if musicians were able to produce music that would have a more or less exactly foreseeable effect on the spectator. It would take a load off the actors' shoulders; it would be particularly useful, for instance, to have the actors play *against* the sentiment that the music called forth. (For rehearsals of works of a pretentious kind it is enough to have whatever music is available.) The silent film provided opportunities for a few experiments with music that created predetermined emotional states. I heard some interesting pieces by Hindemith, and above all by Eisler. Eisler even wrote music for conventional feature films, and extremely austere music at that.

But sound films, being one of the most blooming branches of the international drug trade, will hardly carry on these experiments for long.

Another opening for modern music besides the epic theatre is provided in my view by the *Lehrstück*. Exceptionally interesting music for one or two examples of this type has been written by Weill, Hindemith and Eisler. (Weill and Hindemith together for a radio *Lehrstück* for schoolchildren, *Lindbergh's Flight*; Weill for the school opera *He Said Yes*; Hindemith for *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*; Eisler for *The Decision*.) (See [Plates 9](#) and [10](#))

[‘Über die Verwendung von Musik für ein episches Theater’, BFA 22/155-64]

Typescript, written in 1935 but remained unpublished during Brecht's lifetime; he was in New York City for the rehearsals of *The Mother* at the Theatre Union as of 7 October 1935. He returned to Denmark three months later on 29 January 1936. This text was presumably written before he left Denmark as the draft of a lecture for theatre professionals and then revised in New York City. The production of *The Mother* under the direction of Victor Wolfson opened on 19 November 1935. Brecht is using the English word ‘song’ throughout to convey the cabaret or jazz type of song (much as we use *Lieder* for the opposite).

Concerning emotions, addressed at the end of the article, Brecht noted in a fragment, probably written in the same year and found among his papers on set design: ‘The practice of leaving everything to intuition is more than dangerous in our times of the most horrific conflicts of interest. Our class-based society warps intuition. We have impure – or rather contaminated – emotions, in other words emotions that are often detrimental to our interests. One example among many: the enthusiasm for war among the petty bourgeoisie is an artificially elicited emotion directed at wars that can only bring about their ruin’ (BFA 22/181). The ‘*Mahagonny* songs’ that Weill used to make the first version of the opera in 1927 had already been

given rudimentary tunes by Brecht, just as had the songs in *Baal* and other early plays. Hindemith wrote film music for *In Sturm und Eis* (Arnold Fanck, 1921), *Felix der Kater im Zirkus* (*Felix the Cat in the Circus*, Hans Richter, 1927) and for Oskar Fischinger's experimental short films (1931). Eisler wrote the music for *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), *Niemandslund* (*Hell on Earth*, Victor Trivas, 1931), Joris Ivens's *A Song of Heroes* (1931), *Dans les rues* (*On the Streets*, Victor Trivas, 1933) and *Le Grand jeu* (Jacques Feyder, 1934), among others.

### **Short List of the Most Frequent, Common and Boring Misconceptions about Epic Theatre**

1. It is an ingenious, abstract, intellectualistic theory that has nothing to do with real life.

(In reality it developed and is linked to long-term practical experience. The plays on which it is based have been performed in many German cities; one, *The Threepenny Opera*, has been performed in almost all the world's major cities. Quotes from it served as headlines for political editorials and were used by famous lawyers in their pleas. Some plays were forbidden by the police; one received the most prestigious German prize for drama, the Kleist Prize; the theory was studied in university seminars *etc.* The plays were performed by worker troupes and by stars. The theory had its own theatre, the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre, with a troupe of actors such as Weigel, Neher, Lorre *etc.* who developed these principles. In addition there were Piscator's two theatres that developed some of the principles.)

2. We should not be making theory, we should be writing plays. Anything else is not Marxist.

(A primitive confusion of two concepts – ideology and theory. Proudly finds most of its support in statements by Marx or Engels that themselves are theoretical in nature. In another context Lenin characterizes this as 'creeping empiricism'.)

3. Epic theatre opposes all emotions. But it is impossible to separate reason and feeling.

(Epic theatre does not oppose emotions; it does not stop with inducing them, it also investigates them. Ordinary theatre is guilty of separating reason and feeling because for all practical purposes it eliminates reason. At the slightest attempt to incorporate a bit of reason into theatre praxis, its advocates scream that our goal is to eradicate feelings.)

4. Brecht's ideas are not new. In print it is usually like this: Brecht's 'new'

ideas.

(This is usually said by those who aren't attacking these ideas because they are old and they themselves have newer ones; they usually say it because they are advocating old ideas and have an interest in making sure that other ideas should also be old. Actually the advocates of epic theatre are constantly trying to verify some of their principles in theatre history and do everything they can to get rid of any appearance of novelty that might make their ideas seem trendy. The principles of epic theatre have little to do with the aesthetics of German philosophers from the first half of the previous century, yet as Marx constantly affirms, these aesthetics (of Kant and Hegel) tower above the aesthetic conceptions of many 'Marxists', who in fact neither know them nor have understood them – to say nothing of the teachings of Marx.)

5. We Americans (French, Danes, Swiss etc.) have to construct our aesthetics based on our American (French, Danish, Swiss) plays.

(The Swiss drama does not exist, the French did exist at one time, the American and Danish drama appears to a European to be absolutely European. For a long time epic theatre was characterized as 'un-German' in Germany; the National Socialists characterized it simply as degenerate. On the other hand capitalism is amazingly international and has led, so we hear, to an amazing similarity of conditions in various countries. To see how we can learn from the mistakes of others, see Lenin's 'Infantile Disorder'.)

[*'Kleine Liste der beliebtesten, landläufigsten und banalsten Irrtümer über das epische Theater'*, BFA 22/315-6]

Typescript, probably written in 1937, the text is unfinished and was motivated by a polemic against epic theatre written by the Hungarian Julius Hay (Gyula Háý, in Moscow exile). The references to Lenin are to his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908) and *'Left-Wing' Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (1920).

## **The Progressiveness of the Stanislavsky System**

In every study that has been made of the theatre it has long been presumed as entirely self-evident and natural and not even an object of study that the spectator takes in the theatrical performance through empathy. A theatrical performance is simply said to have failed because the spectator cannot take it in if not put in a position to empathize both with one or many characters of the play and with the milieu in which this character or these characters move. The existing lessons on the actor's or stage designer's techniques – most recently the

Russian actor and director Stanislavsky's fully developed system of theatrical performance – are comprised almost exclusively of suggestions on how the spectator's empathy and identification with the play's characters can be compelled. Stanislavsky's system is a step forward if for no other reason than that it is a system. The acting method he suggests compels the spectator's empathy systematically, which means that empathy is not a by-product of chance, mood or ingenuity. Ensemble acting is valued highly because even the smaller roles and weaker actors can contribute, by using this method, to producing total empathy in the spectator. The system's progressiveness actually becomes visible when the empathy occurs for those characters who until now had played 'no role', that is, proletarian characters. It is no accident that, for example, the leftist theatres in America are beginning to engage with Stanislavsky's system. The acting style seems to ensure a previously unattainable empathy with the proletarian.

In this circumstance it is somewhat difficult to advance the view that due to a series of discussions and experiments newer drama sees itself increasingly forced to more or less radically forego the production of empathy.

[*'Fortschrittlichkeit des Stanislavski-Systems'*, BFA 22/284-5]

Typescript, written in 1937.

## **On Experimental Theatre**

For at least two generations the serious European drama has been passing through a period of experimentation. So far the various experiments have not led to any definite and clearly established result, nor is the period itself over. In my view these experiments were pursued along two lines that occasionally intersected but can none the less be followed separately. They are defined by the two functions of *entertainment* and *instruction*; that is to say that the theatre organized experiments to increase its ability to amuse and others to raise its value as education.

In a fast-paced, 'dynamic' world such as ours the allures of amusement quickly wear off. New effects must be found to counteract the increasing deadening of the public. To distract its distracted audience, the theatre must first focus their attention. It must lure the audience out of their noisy surroundings. The theatre is dealing with a tired audience, exhausted by rationalized day labour and irritated by all sorts of social frictions. They have escaped their own small world, they sit there like refugees. They are refugees, but customers too. They can flee here or elsewhere. The competition among theatres and the competition

between the theatre and the cinema likewise occasion ever new efforts, efforts that always appear to be new.

In reviewing the experiments of Antoine, Brahm, Stanislavsky, Gordon Craig, Reinhardt, Jessner, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Piscator, we find that they have remarkably enriched the expressive possibilities of the theatre. Its capacity to entertain has unquestionably increased. Ensemble acting has created an unusually sensitive and elastic stage presence. Social milieu can be portrayed in the most subtle detail. Vakhtangov and Meyerhold drew certain dancelike forms and created an entire choreography for the drama from Asian theatre. Meyerhold accomplished a radical constructivism, and Reinhardt transformed so-called authentic sites into stages: he played *Everyman* and *Faust* in public spaces. Open-air theatres performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the midst of the forest, and in the Soviet Union there were attempts to repeat the storming of the Winter Palace using the battleship *Aurora*. The barriers between stage and spectator were dismantled. In Reinhardt's *Danton* production at the Grosses Schauspielhaus actors sat in the auditorium, and in Moscow Okhlopkhov seated the spectators on the stage. Reinhardt used the flower path of Chinese theatre [Kabuki hanamichi] and went into the circus arena to play amidst the crowds. The directing of crowds was perfected by Stanislavsky, Reinhardt and Jessner, and the latter extracted from the stage a third dimension by means of his constructions of stairs. Revolving stages and domed cycloramas were invented, and lighting was discovered. Floodlights made large-scale illumination possible. A complete light board enabled us to conjure up the atmosphere of a Rembrandt painting. We could call certain lighting effects Reinhardtian in theatre histories, just as in medical histories we name a certain heart operation after Trendelenburg. There are new ways of using projectors based on the Schüfftan method, and there is a new approach to integrating sound. For the dramatic arts the boundary between cabaret and theatre and between revue and theatre was erased. There were experiments with masks, buskins and pantomime. Far-reaching experiments were undertaken with the ancient, classical repertoire. Shakespeare was frequently refashioned and changed. There were so many interpretations extracted from the classical works that they hardly had any left in them. We saw Hamlet in a dinner jacket, Caesar in a uniform, and at least the dinner jacket and uniform profited by it and gained respectability. The experiments are very uneven, and the most remarkable ones are not always the most worthwhile, but even the most worthless are scarcely ever completely worthless. As far as Hamlet in a dinner jacket is concerned, that is hardly more of a sacrilege for Shakespeare than the conventional Hamlet in silk tights. Both remain within the framework of the costume play.

We can say generally that the experiments to raise the theatre's power to entertain by no means lacked results. They have led especially to the development of theatre machinery. But they are by no means at an end. Indeed, they have not yet moved into general use, as have experimental results in other institutions. A new medical operation in New York can be performed in Tokyo in a very short time. That is not the case with modern stage technology. Artists are clearly hesitant to accept and expand naively the experimental results of other artists. In the arts imitation is treated as disreputable. This is one of the reasons why technical advances have not progressed as far as they could. The theatre in general has not been brought up to the standard of modern technology. It is satisfied by awkwardly utilizing a primitive turning mechanism for the stage, a microphone and a few automobile headlights. Even the experiments in the domain of acting are hardly exploited. Only now is this or that actor in New York beginning to show interest in the methods of the Stanislavsky school.

What is the status of the other, the second function that aesthetics has bestowed on the theatre: instruction? Here too there are experiments and the results of experiments. The drama of Ibsen, Tolstoy, Strindberg, Gorky, Chekhov, Hauptmann, Shaw, Kaiser and O'Neill is an experimental drama. These are grand experiments aimed at reshaping theatrically the problems of our times.<sup>2</sup> We have the socially critical milieu drama that stretches from Ibsen to Nordahl Grieg, the symbolist drama from Strindberg to Pär Lagerkvist. We have the drama type of my *Threepenny Opera*, a parable type that aims to demolish ideology, and we have peculiar types of dramatic form pursued by poets such as Auden and Kjeld Abell, which – seen from a technical perspective – contain revue elements. At times the theatre has succeeded in stimulating social movements (women's emancipation perhaps, the administration of justice, of hygiene, even the emancipation of the working class). Yet it is impossible to hide the fact that the insights into the social workings provided by the theatre were not very profound. As was objected, they were more or less just superficial symptoms of the social situation. The real social laws did not become visible. Yet the experiments in the realm of drama led finally to the almost complete destruction of the *plot* and of *human character*. Placing itself in the service of social reform movements, the theatre lost many of its artistic effects. Not unjustly, but often with dubious arguments, we lament the levelling of artistic taste and the blunting of stylistic sense. In fact, a Babylonian confusion of styles dominates our theatres today as a result of the many diverse experiments. On one and the same stage, in one and the same play, the actors perform with completely dissimilar techniques, in fantastical sets they move naturalistically. The techniques of speech have fallen into a sorry state, iambs are spoken like

everyday language, market jargon is made rhythmical, *etc. etc.* The modern actor is equally helpless when faced with movement. It is meant to be individual but is only arbitrary, it is meant to be natural but is only accidental. One and the same actor uses a movement suitable for the circus and a facial expression that can only be seen from the first row of the orchestra with an opera glass. In short, a close-out sale of all styles of all periods, a totally dishonest competition among all possible and impossible effects! You certainly cannot say that the successes have been rare, but you also cannot say that they have cost us nothing.

I come now to the phase of experimental theatre in which all the efforts mentioned so far achieved their highest standard and with it their crisis. In this phase all manifestations of the grand process, positive and negative, emerged most prominently; thus the increase in the power of entertainment along with the expansion of techniques of illusion, the increase in the value of instruction and the degradation of artistic taste.

Piscator undertook the most radical attempt to endow the theatre with an instructive character. I participated in all of his experiments, and there were none that did not aim to heighten the instructional value of the stage. It was a matter of dealing with the important, contemporary subjects on the stage, the struggles for oil, war, revolution, justice, race problems *etc.* It seemed necessary to rebuild the stage completely. It is impossible to enumerate all the inventions and innovations that Piscator used together with almost all new technical advances in order to bring important, modern subjects to the stage. Some are familiar: the use of film, which can transform the rigid backdrop of the stage into a new co-player, similar to the Greek chorus; or the conveyor belt, which enables the stage floor to move so that epic events can roll past, as in the good soldier Schweik's march to war. International theatres have not yet adopted these inventions; the electrification of the stage has been virtually forgotten; the entire ingenious machinery is rusting away and grass is growing over it.

Why is that?

The breakdown of this eminently political theatre must be attributed to political causes. The increase in the theatre's value as political instruction clashed with the growth of political reaction. But for the moment we shall restrict ourselves to seeing how the theatre's crisis developed in aesthetic terms.

Piscator's experiments began by causing complete theatrical chaos. If they turned the stage into a machine shop, the auditorium became a public meeting space. Piscator saw the theatre as a parliament, the audience as a legislative body. All the great public questions that needed an answer were presented to this parliament in vivid form. Instead of a member of parliament speaking about certain intolerable social conditions, there was an artistic copy of these



conditions. It was the stage's ambition to supply representations, statistics, slogans that would enable its parliament, the public, to reach political decisions. Piscator's stage was not indifferent to applause, but it preferred a discussion. It didn't just want to provide its spectators with an experience; it also wanted to extract from them a practical decision to intervene actively in life. All means were justified to achieve this. The technical side of the stage became extremely complicated. Piscator's stage manager had before him a prompt book that was as different from that of Reinhardt's stage manager as the score of a Stravinsky opera is from a lute-singer's part. The mechanism on the stage weighed so much that the stage of the Nollendorf Theatre had to be reinforced with steel and concrete supports; so much machinery was hung from the dome that it began to give way. Aesthetic considerations were entirely subordinated to political ones. Down with painted scenery if a film could be shown that had been taken on the spot and had the stamp of documentary authenticity. Up with painted cartoons, if the artist (e.g. George Grosz) had something to say to the public parliament. Piscator was even ready to do wholly without actors. When the former German Emperor had his lawyers protest at Piscator's plan to let an actor portray him on his stage, Piscator just asked if the Emperor wouldn't be willing to appear in person; he offered him a contract, so to speak. In short, the goal was such a vast and important one that all means seemed justified. And the plays themselves were prepared in much the same way as the performance. A whole staff of playwrights worked together on a single play, and their work was supported and checked by a staff of experts, historians, economists, statisticians.

Piscator's experiments broke nearly all the conventions. They intervened to transform the playwright's creative methods, the actor's style of representation and the work of the stage designer. *They were striving towards an entirely new social function for the theatre.*

Bourgeois revolutionary aesthetics, founded by such great figures of the Enlightenment as Diderot and Lessing, defines the theatre as a place of entertainment and instruction. The Enlightenment, a period that ushered in a tremendous upsurge of the European theatre, recognized no conflict between entertainment and instruction. Pure amusement, provoked even by objects of tragedy, struck men like Diderot and Lessing as utterly hollow and unworthy unless it added something to the spectators' knowledge, while elements of instruction, in artistic form of course, seemed in no way to detract from the amusement; in their view they gave depth to it.

If we now look at the theatre of our day, we shall find that the two constituent elements of drama and the theatre, entertainment and instruction, have come

more and more into marked conflict. Today there *is* an opposition here.

The 'assimilation of art to science' that gave Naturalism its social influence undoubtedly hamstrung some major artistic capacities, notably the imagination, the sense of play and the genuinely poetic. The instructive elements clearly harmed the artistic elements.

The Expressionism of the post-war period represented the World as Will and Idea and led to a special kind of solipsism. It was the theatre's answer to the great crisis of society, just as the doctrines of Mach were philosophy's. It was art's revolt against life: here the world existed purely as a vision, strangely distorted, a monster conjured up by anxious souls. Expressionism vastly enriched the theatre's means of expression and brought aesthetic gains that still have to be fully exploited, but it proved quite incapable of shedding light on the world as an object of human activity. The theatre's instructional value shrivelled up.

In Piscator's productions or in *The Threepenny Opera* the instructional elements were so to speak *built in*: they were not an organic consequence of the whole, but stood in contradiction to it; they broke up the flow of the play and its incidents, they prevented empathy, they acted as a cold shower for those whose sympathies were becoming involved. I hope that the moralizing parts of *The Threepenny Opera* and the instructive songs are reasonably entertaining, but there can be no doubt that this entertainment is different from what you get from the scenes more properly speaking. The play has a double nature. Instruction and entertainment are at loggerheads. With Piscator it was the actor and the machinery at loggerheads.

This is quite apart from the fact that such productions split the audience into at least two mutually hostile social groups, and thus put a stop to any common experience of art. The fact is a political one. The pleasure of learning depends on the class situation. Artistic enjoyment depends on political attitude, so that it can accordingly be challenged and adopted. But even if we restrict ourselves to the section of the audience that agreed politically, we see the sharpening of the conflict between the power to entertain and instructive value. Here is a new and quite specific kind of learning, and it can no longer be reconciled with a specific old kind of entertainment. At one (later) stage of the experiments the result of any fresh increase in instructive value was an immediate decrease in entertainment value. ('This is no longer theatre, it is adult education.') Conversely, emotional acting's effects on the nerves was a continual threat to the production's instructional value. (It often helped the instructional effect to have bad actors instead of good ones.) In other words, the greater the grip on the audience's nerves, the less chance there was of its learning. The more we

induced the audience to agree, to experience, to sympathize, the less it recognized the connections, the less it learned; and the more there was to learn, the less the artistic enjoyment.

Here was a crisis: half a century's experiments, conducted in nearly every civilized country, had won the theatre a new range of subject matter and types of problem, and made it a factor of marked social importance. At the same time they had brought the theatre to a point where any further development of the intellectual, social (political) experience would wreck the artistic experience. And yet, without further development of the former, the latter occurred less and less often. A technical apparatus and a style of production had been evolved that could produce more illusions than experiences, more deception than enlightenment.

What was the good of a constructivist stage if it was socially unconstructive; of the finest lighting equipment if it lit nothing but childish and twisted representations of the world; of a suggestive style of acting if it only served to tell us that A was B? What use was the whole box of tricks if all it could do was to offer artificial surrogates for real experience? Why this eternal ventilating of problems that were always left unsolved? This titillation not only of the nerves but of the brain? We couldn't leave it at that. The development pressed for a fusion of the two functions, entertainment and instruction.

If such preoccupations were to have any social meaning, then they had to eventually enable the theatre to project a picture of the world by artistic means: models of how people live together that could help the spectator to understand the social surroundings and to master them both rationally and emotionally.

People today know little about the laws that govern their life. They usually react emotionally as social beings, but these emotional reactions are vague, imprecise, ineffective. The sources of the emotions and passions are just as muddied and polluted as the sources of their knowledge. Living in a rapidly changing world and changing rapidly themselves, people today lack a picture of the world that is accurate and can provide the basis for acting with a view to success. Ideas about how people live together are biased, inaccurate and contradictory, and the picture is what we would call impracticable, that is, with this picture of the world, of the human world, before their eyes they cannot control this world. They lack a sense of their own dependencies, they have no grip on the social machinery that is necessary to bring forth the desired effect. As much and as ingeniously deepened and expanded as it is, knowledge of the nature of things without knowledge of the nature of people, of human society in its entirety, is incapable of making the domination of nature a source of happiness for

humankind. It is far more likely that it will become a source of unhappiness. So it happens that the great inventions and discoveries have become an ever more horrible threat to humankind, so that today nearly every invention is greeted by a cry of triumph that soon becomes a cry of fear.

Before the war I experienced a truly historic scene on the radio: the institute of physicist Niels Bohr in Copenhagen was being interviewed about a revolutionary discovery in the field of nuclear fission. The physicists reported that a new, tremendous source of energy had been discovered. When the interviewer asked whether a practical use of the experiment was yet possible, the answer was: no, not yet. In a tone of great relief the interviewer said: Thank God! I really believe that humankind is absolutely not yet mature enough to take on such a source of energy! It was clear that he had only the war industry in mind. The physicist Albert Einstein does not go quite so far, but he goes far enough when he writes the following in a few short sentences that are to be buried in a capsule at the New York World's Fair as a report on our times for future generations:

Our time is rich in inventive minds, the inventions of which could facilitate our lives considerably. We are crossing the seas by power and utilise power also in order to relieve humanity from all tiring muscular work. We have learned to fly and we are able to send messages and news without any difficulty over the entire world through electric waves. However, the production and distribution of commodities is entirely unorganised so that everybody must live in fear of being eliminated from the economic cycle, in this way suffering for the want of everything. Furthermore, people living in different countries kill each other at irregular time intervals, so that also for this reason anyone who thinks about the future must live in fear and terror. This is due to the fact that the intelligence and character of the masses are incomparably lower than the intelligence and character of the few who produce something valuable for the community.

Einstein thus reasons that the domination of nature we have pushed so far contributes so little to a happy life for humankind because people generally lack the knowledge of how to turn the discoveries and inventions into something useful.<sup>3</sup> They know too little about their own nature. That people know so little about themselves is the reason why their knowledge about nature is of so little use to them. Indeed, the horrible oppression and exploitation of people by people, the warlike butchering and peaceful degradations of all kinds across the entire planet have almost become natural now, but humankind is unfortunately not very inventive and clever in the face of these natural phenomena, as when

faced by other natural phenomena. Great wars, for example, appear to many like earthquakes, that is, like nature's violence, but while they can deal with earthquakes, they cannot deal with themselves. It is obvious how much we would gain if, for example, the theatre, or art more generally were in a position to provide a workable picture of the world. An art capable of this could intervene in social development, it would not just provide more or less vague ideas but deliver the world, the world of humankind, to the feeling and thinking people for their own use.

But the problem is not all that simple. The earliest investigation already showed that art, in order to perform its task, that is, to stimulate certain emotions, to provide certain experiences, did not need to produce accurate pictures of the world, correct representations of incidents between people. It achieved its effects even with deficient, deceptive or obsolete pictures of the world. By means of artistic suggestion, which it knows how to practice, it affords the most absurd assertions about human relations the appearance of truth. The more powerful it is, the less verifiable are its presentations. In the place of logic, we have momentum, in the place of argument, we have eloquence. To be sure, aesthetics demands a certain plausibility for all actions, otherwise the effects are unsuccessful or diminished. But here it is a question of purely aesthetic plausibility, a so-called artistic logic. The poet is granted his own world, it has its own laws. If this or that set of elements is specified, then all other elements need only to be specified and the principle of specification to some degree maintained in a uniform way in order to salvage the whole thing.

Art earns this privilege to construct its own world, which need not correspond to any other, by means of a peculiar phenomenon: the spectator's empathy, produced by suggestion, with the artist, and through him, with the persons and actions on the stage. This principle of empathy is what we now must now consider.

Empathy is a central pillar of the prevailing aesthetics. In his brilliant *Poetics* Aristotle describes how catharsis, that is, the spectator's spiritual cleansing, is brought about by means of *mimesis*. The actor imitates the hero (Oedipus or Prometheus), and he does this with such suggestion and transformative power that the spectator imitates him and thus takes possession of the hero's experiences. Hegel, who in my view drafted the last great system of aesthetics, points to the capacity of humankind to experience the same emotions when faced with a simulated reality or reality itself. What I now want to report to you is that a series of experiments to produce a workable picture of the world in the theatre led to the intriguing question of whether we may have to abandon empathy more

or less entirely to this end.

If we do not conceive of humankind, with all its conditions, proceedings, modes of behaviour and institutions, as something stable and unchangeable, and if we assume an attitude towards it like we have had for several centuries towards nature with such success, that is, the critical attitude deriving from changes and aiming at the mastering of nature, then we have no use for empathy. Empathy for changeable humans, avoidable acts, superfluous suffering *etc.* is impossible. As long as the stars of fate are borne in King Lear's breast, as long as we consider him to be unchangeable, his deeds attributable to nature, completely unpreventable, even fateful, we can feel empathy. To discuss his behaviour is as impossible as a discussion about splitting atoms would have been in the tenth century.

If the communication between stage and public came about on the basis of empathy, then the spectators could only see as much as the hero did, with whom they empathized. And they could have only those emotional responses to certain staged situations that were allowed by the 'atmosphere' on stage. The perceptions, emotions and insights of the spectators were synchronized with those of persons acting on stage. The stage could hardly generate emotional responses, allow observations and facilitate insights that were not suggestively represented on it. Lear's wrath could not be questioned as to whether it was justified nor could predictions be made about its possible consequences. It was not to be discussed, only shared. Hence, social phenomena emerged as eternal, natural, unchangeable and unhistorical phenomena and were not open to discussion. If I use the concept of discussion here, I do not mean the dispassionate treatment of a theme, a pure process of reasoning. It wasn't a matter of immunizing the spectators against Lear's wrath, but the direct transplantation of this wrath had to be stopped. An example: Lear's rage is shared by his loyal servant Kent. The latter beats one of the ungrateful daughters' servants whose task it is to deny one of Lear's wishes. Shall the spectators of our time share in Lear's rage and, participating in spirit, approve the thrashing of servant who was carrying out his duty? The question was: how can the scene be played so that the spectators on the contrary fly into a rage over Lear's rage? Only this kind of rage can be justified in our times, an emotion that catapults the spectators out of empathy, an emotion that they can feel and that comes to mind only if the suggestive spell of the stage is broken. Tolstoy had excellent things to say about this.

Empathy is the important tool of art in an age in which the human is the variable and the surroundings are a constant. We feel sympathy only with those who bear the stars of fate in their own breasts, unlike us.

It is not hard to understand that giving up empathy would be an enormous decision for the theatre, perhaps the most consequential of all potential experiments.

People go to the theatre to be swept away, captivated, impressed, uplifted, horrified, moved, held in suspense, set free, distracted, released, enlivened, carried off from the present and supplied with illusions. All this is so obvious that it even defines art, that is, art sets free, sweeps away, uplifts *etc.* It simply isn't art, unless it does so.

The question, then, is this: is the enjoyment of art even possible without empathy, or in any event on a basis other than empathy? What could such a new basis offer us?

What could substitute for *fear* and *pity*, the classical binary that produces Aristotelian catharsis? If you relinquished hypnosis, what could you count on? What attitude are the spectators supposed to assume in the new theatres if denied the illusionary, passive, resigned-to-fate attitude? They are no longer supposed to be abducted from their world into the world of art, no longer be kidnapped; on the contrary, they are to be brought into the real world, with alert faculties. Is it possible, for example, to substitute cooperativeness for pity? Could that create a new contact between stage and spectators? Could that be a new basis for the enjoyment of art? I cannot describe here the new techniques of playwriting, staging and acting that we developed in our experiments. The principle consists of bringing about *Verfremdung* instead empathy.

What is *Verfremdung*?

*Verfremdung* estranges an incident or character simply by taking from the incident or character what is self-evident, familiar, obvious in order to produce wonder and curiosity. Let's look again at Lear's rage and the daughters' ingratitude. Using techniques of empathy, the actor can portray the rage so that the spectators see it as the most natural thing in the world, so that they cannot imagine how Lear could not be enraged, so that they feel complete solidarity with Lear and themselves become enraged. Using techniques of *Verfremdung*, however, the actor portrays Lear's rage so that the spectators wonder about him, so that they can imagine other reactions of Lear than just rage. Lear's attitude is estranged, that is, it is portrayed as unusual, remarkable, notable, as a social phenomenon that is not self-evident. This rage is human, but not universal; there are people who would not feel this way. Lear's experiences need not produce this rage in all people and at all times. It may be an eternally possible reaction on the part of humankind, but this rage, the one that manifests itself in this way, is time-bound. *Verfremdung* is, then, a process of historicizing, of portraying incidents and persons as historical, that is, as ephemeral. The same thing, of

course, can happen to contemporaries, and their attitudes can also be portrayed as time-bound, historical, ephemeral.

Where does this get us? We arrive at a point where spectators no longer see the persons on stage as unchangeable, closed off to influence, helplessly resigned to their fate. They see: this person is like this because the conditions are like that. And the conditions are like that because the person is like this. But this person can be imagined not only as he is but also otherwise, as he could be, and the conditions too can be imagined other than they are. We arrive at a point where the spectators have a new attitude in the theatre. They assume the same attitude towards the representations of the human world on stage just as they, as humans of this century, have towards nature. The spectators are welcomed into the theatre as those who change the world rather than accept it, who intervene in natural and social processes in order to master them. The theatre no longer seeks to intoxicate them, supply them with illusions, help them forget the world, reconcile them with fate. The theatre now spreads the world before them to grasp for their own purposes.

The technique of *Verfremdung* was cultivated in Germany in a series of experiments. At the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre in Berlin we tried to develop a new style of production. The most talented actors of the younger generation worked with us: [Helene] Weigel, Peter Lorre, Oskar Homolka, [Carola] Neher and [Ernst] Busch. The experiments could not be so methodically realized as those (others) of groups around Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov because we had no state support, but they were in fact carried out more widely, not only in the professional theatre. The artists participated in experiments with schools, workers' choruses, amateur groups, *etc.* From the beginning amateurs were also trained. The experiments led to a vast simplification of the theatre apparatus, production style and subject matter.

This all represented a continuation of previous experiments, in particular of Piscator's theatre. In his last experiments the logical development of the technical apparatus had at last allowed the machinery to be mastered and led to a beautiful simplicity of performance. The so-called *epic* style of production that we developed at the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre proved its artistic merits relatively quickly, and the *non-Aristotelian school of play writing* tackled the large-scale treatment of large-scale social objects. There was some prospect of changing the choreographic and grouping aspects of Meyerhold's school from artifice into art, of transforming the Stanislavsky school's naturalistic elements into realism. Speech was related to movement; both everyday language and spoken verse were shaped according to the so-called *gestic principle*. A complete revolution took place in stage design. By freely adapting Piscator's



principles, it became possible to design a setting that was both instructive and beautiful. Symbolism and illusion could be more or less dispensed with, and the *Neher principle* of building the set according to the requirements established at the actors' rehearsals allowed the designer to profit by the actors' performance and influence it in turn. The playwright could work out his experiments in uninterrupted collaboration with actor and stage designer; he could influence and be influenced. At the same time the painter and the composer regained their independence and were able to express their view of the theme by their own artistic means. The total work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] appeared before the spectator as a bundle of separate elements.

From the start the *classical repertoire* supplied the basis of many of these experiments. The artistic means of *Verfremdung* made possible a broad approach to the current value of dramatists of other periods. Thanks to them such valuable old plays could be performed without either jarring modernization or museum-like methods, and in an entertaining and instructive way.

No longer being forced to work by hypnosis plainly has a particularly good effect on contemporary amateur theatre (worker, student and child actors). It seems conceivable that a line may be drawn between the acting of amateur and professional actors without one of the theatre's basic functions having to be sacrificed.

Such very different ways of acting as those of, say, the Vakhtangov or Okhlopkov companies and the workers' groups can be reconciled on this new foundation. The diverse experiments of half a century seem to have acquired a basis that allows them to be exploited.

None the less these experiments are not so easy to describe, and I am forced here simply to state our belief that we can indeed enable artistic enjoyment on the basis of *Verfremdung*. This is not very surprising, as the theatre of past periods also, technically speaking, achieved results with *Verfremdung* effects – for instance the Chinese theatre, the classical Spanish theatre, the popular theatre of Breughel's day and the Elizabethan theatre.

So is this new style of production *the* new style; is it a complete and comprehensible technique, the final result of all the experiments? Answer: no. It is *one* way, the one that *we* have followed. The experiments must be continued. The problem holds for all art, and it is a vast one. The solution we are aiming at is only *one* of the conceivable solutions to the problem, which can be expressed so: How can the theatre be both instructive and entertaining? How can it be removed from the intellectual drug trade and turned from a place of illusions to a place of experiences? How can the unfree, ignorant people of our century, with a thirst for freedom and a hunger for knowledge; how can the tortured and heroic,

abused and ingenious, changeable and world-changing people of this great and ghastly century obtain their own theatre that will help them to master the world and themselves?

[‘Über experimentelles Theater’, BFA 22/540-56.]

Written in March/April 1939, first published in two parts in the journal of the Swiss Association of Socialist Students in Zurich, *Bewusstsein und Sein*, Nr. 3 (1 July 1948) and Nr. 4 (1 November 1948). As the outbreak of war became imminent, Brecht prepared to leave Denmark. To facilitate his entry to Sweden, he declared that he was prepared to present a series of lectures on theatre, to be accompanied with practical demonstrations by Helene Weigel. To this end he completed a first draft in Denmark, integrating many fragments and earlier notes, which he then revised several times. The lecture at the Student Stage Stockholm took place on 4 May 1939, and was repeated that month for an association of amateur theatres. On 18 November 1940, Brecht presented the lecture once again for a student theatre group in Helsinki, where he had moved in the meantime. After the war, having returned to Europe, he allowed a student journal in Switzerland to publish the lecture. The lecture contains the first indication that Brecht wanted to strike a balance between instruction and entertainment. Ever since the *Lehrstück* texts his theoretical writing had been consistently on the side of the former; compare this essay with ‘Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction’, where learning is supposed to contain its own pleasure. This was the period of his great parable and history plays – the first version of *Life of Galileo* was finished in November 1938, *Mother Courage and Her Children* by the end of 1939, *The Good Person of Szechwan* more or less finished in June 1940 – and he was heading for the theoretical compromise of the *Short Organon* (see [Part Three](#)).

### **A Short, Private Lecture for My Friend Max Gorelik**

1. The modern playwright’s (or scene designer’s) relations with his audience are far more complicated than a merchant’s with his customers. But even customers aren’t always right; they by no means represent a final unalterable phenomenon that has been fully explored. Certain habits and appetites can be induced in customers artificially; sometimes it is just a matter of establishing their presence. The farmers were not aware throughout the centuries of their need or potential need for a Ford car. The rapid social and economic development of our period

alters the audience swiftly and fundamentally, demanding and facilitating ever new modes of thought, feeling and behaviour. And a new class is standing, *Hannibal ante portas*, outside the doors of the theatre.

2. The sharpening of the class struggle has engendered such contradictory interests in our audience that it is no longer in a position to react to art spontaneously and unanimously. In consequence artists cannot take spontaneous success as a valid criterion of their work. Nor can they blindly admit the oppressed classes as a court of first instance, for their taste and their instincts are oppressed as well.

3. In times such as these artists are driven to do what pleases themselves, assuming hopefully that they represent the perfect spectator. That needn't lead to an ivory tower so long as they are really concerned with taking part in the struggles of the oppressed, finding out their interests and representing them and developing art on their behalf. But even an ivory tower is a better place to sit nowadays than a Hollywood villa.

4. It leads to a lot of confusion when people hope to put across certain truths by wrapping them up and coating them with sugar. This is much the same as trying to raise the drug trade to a higher moral plane by introducing the truth to the intoxicated; they cannot recognize it in the first place and are certainly incapable of remembering it once they have sobered up.

5. Hollywood's and Broadway's methods of producing certain excitements and emotions may possibly be artistic, but their only use is to offset the fearful boredom induced in any audience by the endless repetition of falsehoods and stupidities. This technique was developed and is used in order to stimulate interest in things and ideas that are not in the interest of the audience.

6. The theatre of our parasitic bourgeoisie has a quite specific effect on the nerves, which can in no way be treated as equivalent to the artistic experience of more vital periods. It 'conjures up' the illusion that it is reflecting real-life incidents with a view to achieving more or less primitive shock effects or hazily defined sentimental moods, which in fact are to be consumed as substitutes for the missing spiritual experiences of an impotent and crippled audience. Even a brief look reveals that every one of these results can also be achieved by utterly distorted reflections of real life. Many artists have indeed come to believe that this timely 'artistic experience' can *only* be the product of such distorted reflections.

7. In comparison to that let's remember that we can feel a natural interest in certain incidents between people quite independently of the artistic sphere. Art can make use of this natural interest. There is also such a thing as a spontaneous interest in art itself; that is, in the capacity to reflect real life and to do so in a

fantastical, personal, individual way, that of the artist in question. Here we have autonomous excitement that doesn't have to be produced, concerning what happens in reality and how the artist expresses it.

8. Conventional theatre can only be defended by using plainly reactionary phrases like 'the theatre never changes' and 'the play's the thing'. By such means the notion of drama is restricted to the parasitic bourgeoisie and its rotten plays. Jove's thunderbolts in the tiny hands of *Louis B. Mayer*. Take the element of 'conflict' in Elizabethan plays, complex, shifting, largely impersonal, never soluble, and then see what has been made of it today, whether in contemporary plays or in contemporary renderings of the Elizabethans. Compare the part played by empathy then and now. What a contradictory, complicated and intermittent operation it was in Shakespeare's theatre! What they offer us nowadays as the 'eternal laws of drama' are the exceedingly present-day laws decreed by *L. B. Mayer* and the Theater Guild.

9. Confusion about non-Aristotelian drama was due to the identification of 'scientific drama' with the 'drama of a scientific age'. The boundaries between art and science are not absolutely immutable; art's tasks can be taken over by science and science's by art, and yet the epic theatre still remains a theatre. That is to say that theatre remains theatre, even while becoming epic.

10. Only the opponents of the new drama, the champions of the 'eternal laws of drama' suppose that in renouncing the empathy process, modern theatre is renouncing the emotions. In reality modern theatre is discarding an outworn, decrepit, subjective sphere of the emotions and paving the way for the new, manifold, socially productive emotions of a new age.

11. Modern theatre mustn't be judged by its success in satisfying the audience's habits but by its success in transforming them. It needs to be questioned not about its degree of conformity with the 'eternal laws of drama' but about its ability to master the rules governing the great social processes of our age; not about whether it manages to interest the spectators in buying a ticket – that is, in the theatre itself – but about whether it manages to interest them in the world.

[*'Kleines Privatissimum für meinen Freund Max Gorelik'*, BFA 23/37-9]

The typescript is dated 'S.M.' (Santa Monica), 'June 1944'. Brecht is responding to views articulated by the American stage designer Mordecai (Max) Gorelik in his book *New Theatres for Old* (New York: Samuel French, 1940; London: Dobson, 1947). Brecht knew him from the New York Theatre Union's production of *The Mother* in 1935, and a year later

he came to Europe on a Guggenheim fellowship, meeting Brecht in Denmark where he consulted on the first production of *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*. On returning to America, he published an annotated version of some of *The Threepenny Opera* notes, which formed the first statement of Brecht's ideas to appear in America (*Theater Workshop*, New York, No. 3, April–July 1937). This was strongly attacked by John Howard Lawson, who referred (in No. 4 of the same magazine) to 'the "new" ideas of Brecht' as being 'discredited and thoroughly un-Marxist' and called Gorelik's presentation of them 'meretricious'. This was no doubt what Brecht was thinking of in the 'Short List of the Most Frequent, Common and Boring Misconceptions about the Epic Theatre' (see above). Gorelik visited Brecht several times in California.

## On Chinese Theatre, *Verfremdung* and Gestus

### On the Art of Spectatorship

The Chinese theatre's attempt to bring about a true art of spectatorship strikes us as especially important. First, when we look at this art, which cannot be understood readily and only emotionally, which is based on so many agreements with the spectator and establishes so many rules on how the spectator must interact with the theatre, we must assume that we are dealing with an art form meant for a small circle of intellectuals, all insiders. However, we realize this is not the case: the broad masses also understand this theatre. And yet it can presume so much! And yet it can call for and produce an art of spectatorship that must be learnt, trained, and then regularly practised in the theatre. The Chinese actor does not simply 'pull the wool over the public's eyes', even if he possesses adequate hypnotic powers (something absolutely abhorrent). Equally, the spectator cannot enjoy this art to the maximum without any knowledge, without the ability to compare and without familiarity with the rules.

[*'Über die Zuschaukunst'*, BFA 22/124-5]

Typescript, written in April/May 1935. Brecht saw original Chinese theatre for the first time during his visit to Moscow in 1935, where actor and director Mei Lan-fang and his theatre troupe were in residence. On 19 March, he presented a private performance at the house of the Chinese Ambassador, one day later a closed performance for Moscow theatre directors and actors consisting of a lecture by a Chinese theatre historian

accompanied by Mei Lan-fang's demonstrations. Three weeks of guest performances followed in Moscow and Leningrad, ending in late April. Mei Lan-fang appeared in two Chinese plays: *Kuei-fei tsui-chiu* (The Drunken Beauty) and *Da yu sha jia* (The Fisherman's Revenge). Sergei Tretiakov, who supervised the residency, helped Brecht get access to the private and public performances as well as to a concluding discussion on 14 April. The performances and encounters with Mei Lan-fang made a lasting impression on Brecht, who compiled numerous notes during his Moscow stay that later found their way into his theory of epic theatre (see [Plates 14, 15 and 16](#)).

### **Maintaining Gestures over Multiple Generations**

At first glance the Chinese theatre's practice of preserving certain gestures and attitudes of characters on stage across several generations of actors seems very conservative. This deters most of them from posing questions, unjustifiably so, because neither the absence of the imperceptible evolution nor the presence of certain (distinctive) gestures is a reliable characteristic of conservatism. Practitioners of epic theatre are interested in the variation of gestures, not in maintaining them, or more precisely, they are interested in maintaining the variations of those gestures. Of course the Chinese stage changes the representation of its stock characters as much as the Western stage. Just because the young actor is forced to imitate the old one at first does not mean that his acting will remain an imitation for a lifetime. First, the gestures seem to be of a broad, impersonal and vague type, can be adopted without damaging the personality of the one adopting them. (In terms of movement and choreography, these gestures are incredibly fixed, with the vagueness referring to the performer's build, his pace, *etc.* We have to look at singing as an example: here, the notes are also fixed, but the timbre and cadence of the voice produces the vagueness of the notes.) Second, the actor can then make changes on his own. They are, however, not imperceptible, but are introduced under the scrutinizing and remembering gaze of the audience and constitute a moment of danger for the actor, who puts his reputation on the line if he is not convincing. In this respect, the change is more powerful than in our theatre. We allow, and in fact expect, every actor to create a completely new character out of the familiar one. But, this new character comes about much more by chance, with too little regard for current or previous performances and says nothing about them, resulting in this character's lack of development; at most these are variants. The Chinese actor tosses out with aplomb certain gestures openly before the eyes of the audience, he throws them out, provoking an aesthetic tumult, carrying out a tumultuous act

himself; he puts his whole reputation on the line in doing so, betting everything on a single card. People will praise the value attributed to this innovation, not the innovation per se. It was difficult to act in the old way and he could do it. He had to develop his innovation from the old way. Thus, the natural moment of tumult – the visible, measurable, responsible act of breaking with tradition – met up with the consistency that is the hallmark of true art and science. If you only consider the superficial characterizations of typical Western actors who assemble their characters from nothing but little nervous traits that mean nothing, that originate more or less from private life and have nothing typical about them, then you will be unable to imagine that modifying gestures can produce fundamental innovations in crafting a character. In fact, bringing about a revolution in the art of acting here is difficult because it is difficult to revolutionize when there is nothing to revolt against.

[‘*Die Beibehaltung der Gesten durch verschiedene Generationen*’, BFA 22/127-9]

Typescript, written in April/May 1935.

### ***Verfremdung* Effects in Chinese Acting**

The following is intended to refer briefly to the use of the *Verfremdung* effect in traditional Chinese acting. This method was most recently used in Germany for a *non-Aristotelian* type drama, that is, plays not dependent on empathy, as part of the experiments being made to evolve an *epic theatre*. The experiments in question were directed at playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious.

This effort to make the incidents represented appear strange to the public can be seen in a primitive form in the theatrical and pictorial displays at the old popular fairs. The way the clowns speak and the way the panoramas are painted both embody an act of *Verfremdung*. The method of painting used to reproduce the picture of *Charles the Bold’s Flight after the Battle of Murten*, as shown at many German fairs, is certainly inadequate; yet the act of *Verfremdung* that is achieved here (not by the original) is in no way due to the inadequacy of the copyist. The fleeing commander, his horse, his retinue and the landscape are all quite consciously painted in such a way as to create the impression of an *extraordinary* event, an outlandish catastrophe. In spite of his inadequacy the painter succeeds brilliantly in bringing out the unexpected. Amazement guides his

brush. Traditional Chinese acting also knows the *Verfremdung* effect and applies it most subtly.

It is well known that the Chinese theatre uses a lot of symbols. Thus a general will carry little pennants on his shoulder, corresponding to the number of regiments under his command. Poverty is shown by patching the silken costumes with irregular shapes of different colours, likewise silken, to indicate that they have been mended. Characters are distinguished by particular masks, that is, simply by painting. Certain gestures of the two hands signify the forcible opening of a door, *etc.* The stage itself remains the same, but articles of furniture are carried in during the action. All this has long been known and cannot very well be exported.

It is not all that simple to break with the habit of assimilating a work of art *as a whole*. But this has to be done if just one of a large number of effects is to be singled out and studied. The *Verfremdung* effect is achieved in the Chinese theatre in the following way.

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. *He expresses that he knows he is being watched*. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event that is really taking place. A whole elaborate European stage technique, which helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audience can view them in the most convenient way, is thereby made unnecessary. The actors openly choose those positions that will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were acrobats. A further means is that *the artist observes himself*. Thus if he is representing a cloud, perhaps, showing its unexpected appearance, its soft and strong growth, its rapid yet gradual transformation, he will occasionally look at the audience as if to say: isn't it just like that? At the same time he also observes his own arms and legs, pointing them out, examining them and perhaps finally praising them. An obvious glance at the floor, so as to judge the space available to him for his act, does not strike him as liable to break the illusion. In this way the artist separates mime (showing observation) from gesture (showing a cloud), but without detracting from the latter, because the body's attitude is reflected in the face and is wholly responsible for its expression. At one moment the expression is of well-managed restraint; at another, of utter triumph. The artist has been using his countenance as a blank sheet, to be inscribed by the gestus of the body.

The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his performance. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are



thereby raised above the level of the self-evident. A young woman, a fisherman's wife, is shown paddling a boat. She stands steering a non-existent boat with a paddle that barely reaches to her knees. Now the current is swifter, and she is finding it harder to keep her balance; now she is in a pool and paddling more easily. Right: that is how you manage a boat. But this journey in the boat is apparently historic, celebrated in many songs, an exceptional journey about which everybody knows. Each of this famous girl's movements has probably been recorded in pictures; each bend in the river is an adventure, a familiar one, even this particular bend in the river is well-known. This feeling on the audience's part is induced by the artist's attitude; it is this that makes the journey famous. The scene reminded us of the march to Budejovice in Piscator's production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Schweik's three-day march under sun and moon to a front that he oddly enough never gets to was seen from a completely historic point of view, as no less noteworthy a phenomenon than, for instance, Napoleon's Russian expedition of 1812.

The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, prevents the spectators from losing themselves completely in the character, that is, to the point of giving up their own identity, and lends a splendid distance to the events. Yet the spectators' empathy is not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops the attitude of observing or looking on.

The Chinese artist's performance often strikes the Western actor as cold. That does not mean that the Chinese theatre rejects the portrayal of feelings. The performer portrays incidents of utmost passion, but without the delivery becoming heated. At those points where the character portrayed is deeply excited, the performer takes a lock of hair between his lips and chews it. But this is like a ritual, there is nothing eruptive about it. It is quite clearly somebody else's repetition of the incident: a depiction, even though an artistic one. The performer shows that this person has lost control and points to the outward signs. And so lack of control is decorously expressed, or if not decorously at any rate decorously for the stage. Among all the possible signs certain particular ones are picked out, with careful and visible consideration. Rage is naturally different from resentment, hatred from distaste, love from sympathy; but the corresponding fluctuations of feeling are portrayed economically. The coldness comes from the actor distancing himself from the character portrayed, along the lines described. He is careful not to make the character's sensations into those of the spectator. Nobody is overpowered by the individual he portrays; this individual is not the spectator but the spectator's neighbour.

The Western actor does all he can to bring the spectator into the closest

proximity to the events and the character he has to portray. To this end he persuades him to *identify* himself with him (the actor) and uses all his energy to transform himself as completely as possible into a different type, that of the character in question. If this *complete transformation* succeeds, then his art has been more or less expended. Once he has *become* the bank clerk, doctor or general concerned, he will need no more art than the bank clerk, doctor or general needs 'in real life'.

This act of complete transformation is extremely exhausting. Stanislavsky puts forward a series of means – a complete system – by which what he calls 'creative mood' can be repeatedly produced afresh at every performance. Usually the actor cannot manage for long to feel that he really is the other person; he soon gets exhausted and begins just to copy various externalities of the other person's bearing and tone of voice, whereupon the effect on the public drops off alarmingly. This is certainly due to the fact that the other person has been created by an 'intuitive' and accordingly murky process that takes place in the subconscious. The subconscious is very difficult to regulate; it has, as it were, a bad memory.

These problems are unknown to the Chinese performer, for he rejects the complete transformation. He limits himself from the start to simply quoting the character played. But with what art he does this! He needs only a minimum of illusion. What he has to show is worth seeing even for those in their right mind. What Western actor of the old sort (apart from one or two comedians) could demonstrate the elements of his art like the Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang, without special lighting and wearing a dinner jacket in an ordinary room full of specialists? Say, King Lear's division of his kingdom or Othello discovering the handkerchief? It would be like the magician at a fair giving away the tricks, so that nobody ever wanted to see the act again. He would just be showing how to disguise oneself; the hypnotism would vanish, leaving a few pounds of ill-blended imitation, a quickly-mixed product for selling in the dark to hurried customers. Of course, no Western actor would stage such a demonstration. What about the sanctity of Art? The mysteries of transformation? To the Westerner what matters is that the actions should be unconscious; otherwise they would lose their value. By comparison with Asiatic acting our own art still seems hopelessly preacherly. None the less it is becoming increasingly difficult for our actors to bring off the mystery of complete transformation; their subconscious memory is getting weaker and weaker, and it is almost impossible to extract the truth from the contaminated intuitions of any member of our class society, even when the man is a genius.

For the actor it is difficult and taxing to conjure up particular inner moods or

emotions night after night; it is simpler to perform the outer signs that accompany these emotions and identify them. In this case, however, there is not the same automatic transfer of emotions to the spectator, the same *emotional infection*. The *Verfremdung* effect intervenes, not in the form of *absence* of emotion, but in the form of emotions that need not correspond to those of the character portrayed. On seeing worry, the spectator may feel a sensation of joy; on seeing anger, one of disgust. When we speak of performing the outer signs of emotion, we do not mean a sort of performance and choice of signs that accomplishes the emotional transference because the actor has managed to infect himself with the emotions portrayed by performing these outer signs; thus, by letting his voice rise, holding his breath and tightening his neck muscles so that the blood shoots to his head, the actor can easily conjure up a rage. In such a case, of course, the *Verfremdung* effect does not occur. But it does occur if the actor at a particular point unexpectedly shows a completely white face, which he has produced mechanically by holding his face in his hands with some white make-up on them. If the actor at the same time displays an apparently composed character, then his fright at this point (as a result of this message, or that discovery) will give rise to a V-effect. Acting like this is healthier and in our view more worthy of a thinking being; it demands a considerable knowledge of humanity and worldly wisdom, and a keen eye for what is socially important. In this case too there is, of course, a creative process at work; but it is a higher one, because it is raised to the conscious level.

The V-effect does not in any way demand an unnatural way of acting. It has nothing whatever to do with ordinary stylization. On the contrary, triggering a V-effect absolutely depends on lightness and naturalness of performance. But when the actor checks the *truth* of his performance (a necessary operation, which gives Stanislavsky much trouble in his system), he is not just thrown back on his 'natural sensibilities', but can always be corrected by a comparison with reality (is that how an enraged person really speaks? is that how an offended person sits down?) and so from outside, by other people. He acts in such a way that nearly every sentence could be followed by a verdict of the audience and practically every gesture is submitted for the public's approval.

The Chinese performer is not in a trance. He can be interrupted at any moment. He won't have to 'come round'. After an interruption he will go on with his performance from that point. We are not disturbing him at the 'mystic moment of creation'; when he steps on to the stage before us, the process of creation is already over. He does not mind if the setting is changed around him as he plays. Busy hands quite openly pass him what he needs for his performance. When Mei Lan-fang was playing a death scene, a spectator sitting

next me exclaimed with astonishment at one of his gestures. One or two people sitting in front of us turned round indignantly and ssshhh'd. They behaved as if they were present at the real death of a real girl. Possibly their attitude would have been all right for a European production, but for a Chinese it was unspeakably ridiculous. In their case the V-effect had misfired.

It is not entirely easy to recognize the Chinese actor's V-effect as a *transportable technique* (detachable from the Chinese theatre). We see this theatre as uncommonly precious, its portrayal of human passions as schematized, its idea of society as rigid and wrong-headed; at first sight this superb art seems to offer nothing applicable to a realistic and revolutionary theatre. Against that, the motives and objects of the V-effect strike us as odd and suspicious.

When you see the Chinese acting it is at first very hard to discount the feeling of strangeness that they produce in us as *Europeans*. You have to be able to imagine them achieving a V-effect among their Chinese spectators too. What is still harder is that you must accept the fact that when the Chinese performers conjure up an impression of mystery, they seem uninterested in disclosing a mystery to us. They make their own mystery from the mysteries of nature (especially human nature): they allow nobody to examine how they produce the natural phenomenon, nor does nature allow them to understand as they produce it. We have here the artistic counterpart of a primitive technology, a rudimentary science. The Chinese performer gets his V-effect by association with magic. 'How it's done' remains hidden; knowledge is a matter of knowing the tricks and is in the hands of a few people who guard it jealously and profit from their secrets. And yet there is already an attempt here to interfere with the course of nature; the capacity to do so leads to questioning; and the future explorer, anxious to make nature's course intelligible, controllable and down-to-earth, will always start by adopting a standpoint from which it seems mysterious, incomprehensible and beyond control. He will take up the attitude of somebody wondering, will apply the V-effect. There is no mathematician who takes it for granted that 'two and two makes four'; nor is there one who fails to understand it. The man who first looked with astonishment at a swinging lantern and instead of taking it for granted found it highly remarkable that it should swing, and swing in that particular way rather than any other, was brought close to understanding the phenomenon by this observation, and so to mastering it. Nor must it simply be exclaimed that the attitude here proposed is all right for science but not for art. Why shouldn't art try, by its *own* means of course, to further the great social task of mastering life?

In point of fact the only people who can profitably study a piece of technique like Chinese acting's V-effect are those who need such a technique for quite

definite social purposes.

The experiments conducted by the modern German theatre led to a wholly independent development of the V-effect. So far Asian acting has exerted no influence.

The V-effect was achieved in the German epic theatre not only by the actor, but also by the music (choruses, songs) and the setting (placards, film etc.). It was principally designed to *historicize* the incidents portrayed. By this the following is meant:

The bourgeois theatre emphasizes the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged 'eternally human'. Its story is arranged in such a way as to create 'universal' situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every colour. All its incidents are just one enormous cue, and this cue is followed by the 'eternal' response: the inevitable, usual, natural, purely human response. An example: a black man falls in love in the same way as a white man; the story forces him to react with the same expression as the white man (in theory this formula works as well the other way round); and with that the sphere of art is attained. The cue can take account of what is special, different; the response is shared, there is no element of difference in it. This notion may allow that such a thing as history exists, but it is none the less unhistorical. A few circumstances vary, the milieu is altered, but Man remains unchanged. History applies to the milieu, not to Man. The milieu is remarkably unimportant, is treated simply as a pretext; it is a variable quantity and something remarkably inhuman; it exists in fact apart from Man, confronting him as a coherent whole, whereas he is a fixed quantity, eternally unchanged. The idea of man as a function of the milieu and the milieu as a function of man, that is, the breaking up of the environment into relationships between people, corresponds to a new way of thinking, the historical way. Rather than be sidetracked into the philosophy of history, let us give an example. Suppose the following is to be shown on the stage: a girl leaves home in order to take a job in a fair-sized city (Piscator's *American Tragedy*). For the bourgeois theatre this is an insignificant affair, clearly the beginning of a story; it is what we have been told in order to understand what comes after, or to be keyed up for it. The actor's imagination will hardly be greatly stimulated by it. In a sense the incident is universal: girls take jobs (in the case in point we can be keyed up to see what in particular is going to happen to her). Only in one way is it particular: this girl goes away (if she had remained, what comes after would not have happened). The fact that her family lets her go is not the object of the inquiry; it is understandable (the motives are understandable). But for the historicizing theatre everything is different. The theatre concentrates entirely on

whatever in this perfectly everyday event is remarkable, particular and demanding inquiry. What! A family letting one of its members leave the nest to earn her future living independently and without help? Is she up to it? Will what she has learnt here as a member of the family help her to earn her living? Can't families keep a grip on their children any longer? Have they become (or remained) a burden? Is it like that with every family? Was it always like that? Is this the way of the world, something that can't be affected? The fruit falls off the tree when ripe: does this sentence apply here? Do children always make themselves independent? Did they do so in every age? If so, and if it's something biological, does it always happen in the same way, for the same reasons and with the same results? These are the questions (or a few of them) that the actors must answer if they want to show the incident as a unique, historical one: if they want to demonstrate a custom that leads to conclusions about the entire structure of a society at a particular (transient) time. But how is such an incident to be represented if its historic character is to be brought out? How can the confusion of our unfortunate epoch be striking? When the mother, in between warnings and moral injunctions, packs her daughter's case – a very small one – how is the following to be shown: So many injunctions and so few clothes? Moral injunctions for a lifetime and bread for five hours? How is the actress to speak the mother's sentence as she hands over such a very small case – 'There, I guess that ought to do you' – in such way that it is understood as a historic dictum? This can only be achieved if the V-effect is brought out. The actress must not make the sentence her own affair, she must hand it over for criticism, she must make it possible to understand its causes and to protest. The effect can only be got by long training. In the New York Yiddish Theatre, a highly progressive theatre, I saw a play by S. Ornitz showing the rise of an East Side boy to become a big crooked attorney. The theatre was unable to perform the play. And yet there were scenes like this in it: the young attorney sits in the street outside his house giving cheap legal advice. A young woman arrives and complains that her leg has been hurt in a traffic accident. But the case has been bungled and her compensation claim has not yet been filed. In desperation she points to her leg and says: 'It's started to heal up.' Working without the V-effect, the theatre was unable to make use of this extraordinary scene to show the horror of a bloody epoch. Few people in the audience noticed it; hardly anyone who reads this will remember that cry. The actress spoke the cry as if it were something perfectly natural. But it is exactly this – the fact that this poor creature finds such a complaint natural – that she should have reported to the public like a horrified messenger returning from the lowest of all hells. To that end she would of course have needed a special technique that would have allowed her to

highlight the historical aspect of a specific social condition. Only the V-effect makes this possible. Without it all she can do is to observe how she is not forced to transform herself entirely into the character on the stage. In setting up new artistic principles and working out new methods of representation we must start with the compelling demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and the possibility of remodelling society come to the surface. *All* incidents between people must be noted, and everything must be seen from a social point of view. Among other effects that a new theatre will need for its social criticism and its historical reporting of completed transformations is the V-effect.

[‘*Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst*’, BFA 22/200-10]

Typescript, written in the second half of 1936. Although unpublished in German until 1949, this essay appeared in winter 1936 in an English translation by Eric Walter White, most likely authorized by Brecht, in *Life and Letters To-day* (London). During his stay in Moscow in spring 1935, Brecht had seen Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang perform (see ‘On the Art of Spectatorship’) and already began articulating his thoughts, but this essay was written after his trip to New York City in fall 1935. The text documents Brecht’s first usage of the neologism *Verfremdung* effect and V-effect. That he had already been feeling his way towards some such formula can be seen from his use of the related term *Entfremdung* or alienation in ‘Theatre for Pleasure and Theatre for Instruction’ (see above), written before the trip to Moscow in 1935. Brecht’s host in Moscow, Sergei Tretyakov, may have introduced him to the concept of *Verfremdung*, referring to the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky’s phrase *priem ostranenie*, or ‘device for making strange’ (see his 1917 essay ‘Art as Technique’). Brecht references here the Chinese play *Da yu sha jia* (The Fisherman’s Revenge), performed by Mei Lan-fang in Moscow, Piscator’s plan for a dramatization of Theodor Dreiser’s 1925 novel *An American Tragedy* (produced only in 1936 on Broadway under the title *The Case of Clyde Griffiths*, with Lee Strasberg directing) and Samuel Badisch Ornitz’s semi-fictional autobiography *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, adapted and performed in 1935 by the Yiddish theatre group, Artef Players’ Collective, in New York City.

## **Three Notes on *Verfremdung* and the Elder Breughel**

### **1) *Verfremdung* Techniques in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Breughel**

Anyone making a profound study of Breughel’s pictorial contrasts must realize that he deals in contradictions. In *The Fall of Icarus* the catastrophe breaks into

the idyll in such a way that it is clearly set apart from it and that valuable insights into the idyll can be gained. He does not allow the catastrophe to alter the idyll; the latter rather remains unaltered and survives undestroyed, merely disturbed. In the great war painting *Dulle Griet* not the atmosphere of war's terror inspires the artist to paint the instigator, the Fury of War, as helpless and handicapped, and to give her the features of a servant (see [Plate 17](#)). The terror he creates in this way is something deeper. Whenever an Alpine peak is set down in a Flemish landscape or old Asiatic costumes confront modern European ones, then the one denounces the other and sets off its oddness, while at the same time we get landscape as such, people all over the place.

Such pictures do not just give off an atmosphere but a variety of atmospheres. Although Breughel manages to balance his contrasts, he never harmonizes them.

Neither does he practise the separation of comic and tragic; his tragedy contains a comic element and his comedy a tragic one.

## ***2) On the V-effect of the Elder Breughel***

Hardly any other painter depicted the world as beautifully as Breughel, who portrayed human activities so perversely. He consigned his impractical, foolish, ignorant people to a wonderful world. For him nature's beauty has something overpowering, unexploited: it has not yet been vanquished, hardly infected by humankind.

## ***3) V-effects in Some Pictures of the Elder Breughel***

*Christ Driving the Money-changers from the Temple.* Coupling this with Christ's carrying the cross, when the money-changers were expelling him later. The first incident big, the second small. Heathen temple architecture with Christian church symbols and a German city in the left background. Jesus in oriental dress among contemporary Flemings. The miracle-worker in the courtyard, left. The mother chastising her child next door. The man in the pillory (criminals are not unknown here either). Time – the twelfth hour.

*The Fall of Icarus.* Tiny scale of this legendary event (you have to hunt for the victim). The characters turn their backs on the incident. Lovely picture of the concentration needed for ploughing. The man fishing in the right foreground, and his particular relationship to the water. The setting of the sun, which many people find surprising, presumably means that the fall was a long one. How otherwise can it be shown that Icarus flew too high? Daedalus has not been visible for quite a while. Contemporary Flemings in an ancient Mediterranean landscape. Special beauty and gaiety of the landscape during the frightful event.



*River Landscape with the Parable of the Sower.* Flemish landscape with an Alpine range. The peasant is sowing on a hillside among brambles. Pigeons are immediately picking up the seeds. They seem to be holding a formal council of war. The breadth of the world.

*Christ Carrying the Cross.* Execution as a popular festivity. The Spanish horsemen in red tunics as *foreign troops*: a thread of scarlet to indicate direction and movement and distract us from the execution. On the extreme left, the common people at work, the least interested. In the left background, people running, anxious about arriving too late. On the right they are already waiting in a circle round the place of execution. The scene in the left foreground – somebody being arrested – excites more attention than does Christ's collapse. Mary less concerned with Jesus than with her own sorrow. Note the woman on her left, the mourner in the rich and carefully draped dress. The world is beautiful and seductive.

*The Conversion of Saul.* The fall was from a horse: it is the conversion of a nobleman. The passage of the Alps by the Duke of Alba's Spanish army is amusingly estranged by the idea of conversion. Carefully chosen and arbitrarily distributed colours underscore the painter's interest.

*The Archangel Michael.* The beauty of the world (landscape) and the hideousness of its inhabitants (the devil). The devil wears earth pigments as protective colouring. The earth is his domain. Seemingly the angel hasn't so much overcome him as discovered him (no evidence of struggle). The angel armed and armoured, the devil without weapons and unprotected. The devil's expression tragic, meditative; that of the angel shows sorrow and disgust. He is on the point of cutting off the head like a surgeon. Size of the figures indicated by the smallness of the trees behind, which are very big but smaller than the figures.

*The Tower of Babel.* The tower has been put up askew. It includes portions of cliff, between which the artificiality of the stonework is revealed. Delivery of the building materials is a very laborious business; the effort is obviously wasted; higher up a new plan seems to be underway, cutting down the scale of the original enterprise. Powerful oppression prevails, the attitude of the men bringing up the building materials is extremely servile. The builder is guarded by armed men.

*The Census at Bethlehem* and *The Massacre of the Innocents.* For the people it seems to be dangerous to let themselves be counted; much better if they don't find you.

*Dulle Griet.* The Fury defending her pathetic household goods with the sword. – The world is out of joint. – Little cruelty, much hypersensitivity.

[‘Verfremdungstechnik in den erzählenden Bildern des älteren Breughel’, ‘Über den V-Effekt beim älteren Breughel’, ‘V-Effekte in einigen Bildern des älteren Breughel’, BFA 22/270-3]

Typescript, probably written in January/February 1937. For Christmas 1936, Brecht received an edition of Bruegel paintings edited by Gustav Glück, *Bruegels Gemälde* (Vienna: Anton Scholl, 1932), and they made a great impression on him. In the 1940s, Viennese art historian Glück and his wife were also living in Santa Monica and visited Brecht. The painter’s name is variously spelled Pieter Bruegel or Brueghel and, in Brecht’s notes, usually Breughel.

### **On Determining the Zero Point**

Set designers, like actors, often set the starting point for their work too high. The correct starting point is the zero point.

Instead of starting by getting excited about the work, getting into the mood, chasing visions or thinking about all the things they could fit in that they had always wanted to do – they would be better off trying to sober up, be open-minded rather than excited, give more thought to the problem rather than emphasize the emotional side of things.

A wall and a chair are already a lot. It is quite difficult to place a wall and position a chair well. If the goal is to build the courtyard of a factory, that should happen at least in the set designer’s head little by little, accompanied by the constant question: Is it already a factory? At the same time the needs of the actors must be considered.

[‘Über das Ansetzen des Nullpunkts’, BFA, 22/244]

Typescript, written in fall 1936 or early 1937.

### **The Zero Point**

Determining the zero point vis à vis the play is of great importance. Before the performance begins, nobody working on the project should view that process as complete. Undoubtedly the play is a whole in a sense. But to view it as sacrosanct is completely wrong. A certain tenseness on the part of the rehearsing actors, the obsession with demonstrating something from the outset, mistaken reverence for the playwright that makes them forget reverence for the audience – all this prevents them from comprehending the play’s mistakes. But it is necessary to rehearse not just how a play should be performed but also whether

it should be performed.

[‘*Der Nullpunkt*’, BFA, 22/245]

Typescript, written in fall 1936 or early 1937.

## **Notes on *Pointed Heads and Round Heads***

### ***Description of the Copenhagen premiere***

#### *General*

The premiere was given in Copenhagen on 4 November 1936 in the Riddersalen Theatre under Per Knutzon’s direction. One can smoke and eat in this theatre; it holds 220. The stage is 7 metres wide, 8 metres deep and 10 metres high.

#### *Special characteristics of the parable form*

This play, the parable type of non-Aristotelian drama, demanded a considerable sacrifice of effects of illusion on the part of actors and stage set. The preparations, made so as to bring out the parable, had themselves to be transparent. The acting had to enable and encourage the audience to draw abstract conclusions. During Missena’s final speech the barrel of an enormous gun was lowered on wires so that it dangled above the banquet table. The tenant farmer Callas on his way to gaol (scene 10) went right through the auditorium, telling his story over again to the spectators. [Other examples follow.]

#### *Building up a part (inductive method)*

The parts were built up from a social point of view. The modes of behaviour shown by the actors had transparent motives of a social-historical sort. It was not the ‘eternally human’ that was supposed to emerge, not what any person is alleged to do at any period, but what people of specific social strata (as against other strata) do in our period (as against any other). Because actors are accustomed to rely primarily on the spectators’ empathy, which means exploiting their most easily accessible emotions, they nearly always run a whole sequence of sentences together and give a common expression to them. But with the kind of drama under consideration it is essential that each separate sentence should be treated for its underlying social gestus. The characters’ unity is in no way upset by exactly reproducing their contradictory behaviour; it is only in their development that they really come to life. [Individual characters from the play are then discussed in detail.]

*Influence the audience (by the inductive method)*

A considerable sacrifice of the spectator's empathy does not mean sacrificing influence altogether. Indeed, the representation of human behaviour from a social point of view is meant to have a decisive influence on the spectator's own social behaviour. This sort of intervention is necessarily bound to release emotional effects; they are deliberate and have to be controlled. A creation that more or less renounces empathy need not by any means be an 'unfeeling' creation, or one that leaves the spectator's feelings out of account. But it has to adopt a critical approach to the spectator's emotions, just as it does to the ideas. Emotions, instincts, drives are generally presented as being deeper, more eternal, less easily influenced by society than ideas, but this is in no way true. The emotions are neither common to all humanity nor incapable of alteration, the instincts neither infallible nor independent of reason, the drives neither uncontrollable nor spontaneously engendered and so on. But above all the actor must bear in mind that no worthwhile feeling can be compromised by being brought clearly and critically to the conscious level. A character's step-by-step development, as he initiates more and more relationships with other characters, consolidating or expanding himself in continually new situations, produces a rich and sometimes complicated emotional curve in the spectator, a fusion of feelings and even a conflict between them.

## Verfremdung

Certain incidents in the play should be treated as self-contained scenes and raised – by means of inscriptions, musical or sound effects and the actors' way of playing – above the level of the everyday, the obvious, the expected (that is, estranged or *verfremdet*). [The four or five chief incidents in each of the play's eleven scenes are then listed.]

### *Examples of Verfremdung in the Copenhagen production*

When Nanna Callas sang her introductory song (scene 2), she stood beneath the signboards of the small traders [ ... ], a commodity among other commodities, beckoning to the audience before the third verse with a mechanical prostitute's smile that she promptly switched off.

Before the fifth scene a young nun entered through the Neher curtain carrying a gramophone and sat down on some steps. A record of organ music accompanied the first, pious section of the scene (up to the sentence 'What will the young lady bring with her?'). The nun then got up and went out with the gramophone.

The meeting of the two de Guzmans in the eighth scene (a street in the old town) was based on Claudio's conversation with Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The scene has to be played with complete seriousness in the heightened and impassioned style of the Elizabethan theatre. The Copenhagen production estranged this style by having it rain during the scene and giving umbrellas to all appearing in it. In this way the heightened style of playing was given a certain artistic *Verfremdung*. The spectators, however, having had their attention drawn to the outmoded nature of such conduct, were not as yet brought to notice that heightened means of expression are bound up with the individual conduct of the upper class. This could be achieved, for example, by having the inspector and the Hatso [strong-arm men like the Nazi SA] who escort the prisoner adopt a particular offhand or even amused but at the same time slightly surprised attitude to the event.

This demonstration of historical theatrical forms continued with the ninth scene in Frau Cornamontis's coffeehouse, which contained elements of the late eighteenth-century French conversation piece. Isabella had completely white make-up in this scene.

### *Stage set and masks*

The basic set consisted of four ivory-coloured screens, slightly curved

horizontally, which could be arranged in various ways. The lights were shown, in so far as they were movable. The two pianos were illuminated while working; their mechanism was laid open. Scene changes took place behind a small Neher curtain, which did not completely interrupt vision but allowed bridge scenes to be played. The set was constructed and elaborated during the rehearsals. [A long list of props follows.]

Heads were about 20 centimetres high. The masks showed drastic distortions of nose, ears, hair and chin. The Hatsos had unnaturally large hands and feet.

The women's costumes were coloured and not restricted to any particular fashion; the farmers wore black trousers, linen shirts and clogs; the rich landowners were dressed to go to the races; Missena in uniform; the petty bourgeoisie in ordinary suits (see [Plate 18](#)).

### *Sound effects*

Recently the gramophone industry has started supplying the stage with records of real noises. These add substantially to the spectator's illusion of *not* being in a theatre. Theatres have fallen on them avidly; so that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is now accompanied by the real noise of the mob. So far as we know the first person to make use of records was Piscator. He applied the new technique entirely correctly. In his production of the play *Rasputin* a record of Lenin's voice was played. It interrupted the performance. In another production a new technical achievement was demonstrated: the transmission by wireless of the sound of a sick man's heart. A film simultaneously showed the heart contracting. The fact that we can now get a specialist's opinion for a case of illness on a boat or in some remote place played no part in the play. The point was simply to show how greatly human communications have been simplified by science, and that social conditions at present act as an obstacle to the full exploitation of the fact.

In a parable-type play sound effects should only be used if they too have a parable function, and not in order to evoke atmosphere and illusion. The marching feet of Iberin's troops as they go to war (scene 11) can come from a record. So can the victory bells (scenes 7 and 8) and the execution bell (in scene 11). A noise that should not come from a record is that, for example, of the well at which the tenants are working (scene 3). Synthetic popular noises can accompany Iberin's entry (scene 4); while the reaction of the crowd outside the courtroom (scene 4) to the tenants' demands and the decisions of the governor, and the crowd noises at the news of victory (scene 7), can likewise be artificial.

It is best to place the record player, like the orchestra, so that it can be seen. But if such an arrangement would shock the audience unduly, or give too much

cause for amusement, it should preferably be dropped.

[‘Anmerkungen zu “Die Spitzköpfe und die Rundköpfe” ’, BFA 24/207-19, less all detailed descriptions of characters and incidents from the play]

Brecht probably wrote these notes shortly after the Copenhagen production at the end of 1936, and in any case before 1938 when the text was published in London, in volume two of the Malik edition of his works. The play itself began life about 1931 as a proposed adaptation of *Measure for Measure*. A preliminary version without songs was completed before Brecht left Germany in 1933. The songs were set by Hanns Eisler. This is the first instance of Brecht applying the theory of *Verfremdung* practically to his own work. The Neher curtain (mentioned under ‘Examples of *Verfremdung*’) is the characteristic half-height curtain devised by Caspar Neher, which Brecht and Neher subsequently used for nearly all the productions in which they were involved. Erwin Piscator produced *Rasputin* in the Theater am Nollendorfplatz (Berlin) on 12 November 1927. Brecht helped with the adaptation, based on Alexei Tolstoy.

## **On the Production of the V-effect**

### *Producing the V-effect in gestures*

Separating gestus from facial expression is one simple method for the actor to produce the V-effect. He only has to put on a mask and follow his performance in the mirror. In this manner he will easily arrive at a selection of gestures that are rich in themselves. The very fact that he has selected the gestures is what produces the V-effect. The actor should then integrate into the performance something of the attitude that he noted in the mirror.

### *Producing the V-effect in speech*

By rehearsing in a mask, the actor also produces the V-effect in speech. He observes that he must form a collection here as well, a collection of specific vocal inflections. In this way he facilitates the translation from the natural into the artificial, translating according to the meaning.

### *Style and naturalness*

The naturalness of the gestures and of vocal inflections must not be lost in the process of selection. Stylization is not the intent. In stylization gestures and inflections ‘mean something’ (fear, pride, pity and so on). Gestus produced

through this kind of stylization causes the flow of actions and reactions to dissolve into a series of fixed symbols; a kind of writing with very abstract characters comes into being, and the representation of human behaviour becomes schematic and nonspecific. When Weigel demonstrates the *baking of bread* in *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, Señora Carrar's *baking of bread* on the evening of her son's execution is something totally specific, absolutely untransportable. In it many things are unified: the preparation of a final loaf, a protest against other types of activities (for example, joining the fight). At the same time the *baking of bread* becomes a clock measuring the passage of events: Carrar's transformation takes the same amount of time as the *baking of bread*.



URAUFFÜHRUNG  
**BERT BRECHT**  
« Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar »

Künstlerische Gesamtleitung : S. Th. DUDOW  
Mitwirkende :  
**HELENE WEIGEL**  
ALS GAST  
STEFFIE SPIRA - H. ALTMANN  
W. FLORIAN - W. HAIN  
G. RUSCHIN - S. SCHIDLOFF  
Bühnenbild : H. LOHMAR

Sonnabend den  
**16. OKTOBER 1937**  
Sonntag den  
**17. OKTOBER 1937**  
8 45

**SALLE ADYAR**  
4, Square Rapp, Paris-7<sup>e</sup>

Autobus : 14, 20, 43, 26, 28, AC,  
AD, AH, AG, CA, M, Y, AX.  
Métro : Ecole Militaire - Alma

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**ABENDKASSE**  
EINLASS 8 30

**SONGS UND BALLADEN**  
Am Flügel : J. COSMA

« **Der letzte Milliardär** »  
Ein Film von RENÉ CLAIR

Unter dem Protektorat des Schutzverbandes  
Deutscher Schriftsteller

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spanischen Volkes gewidmet. Alle Freunde des spanischen Volkes, alle  
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Aufführung begrüßen.

Da nur zwei Aufführungen stattfinden, ist dringend zu empfehlen, die  
Karten im Vorverkauf zu lösen.

**Figure 5** Programme cover for the 1937 Paris production of *Señora Carrar's Rifles*.



Typescript, probably written in 1938.

## On Gestic Music

### 1. Definition

‘Gestus’ is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes. A language is gestic when it is grounded in a gestus and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other persons. The sentence ‘pluck the eye that offends thee out’ is less effective from the gestic point of view than ‘if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out’. The latter starts by presenting the eye, and the first clause has the definite gestus of making an assumption; the main clause then comes as a surprise, a piece of advice and a relief.

### 2. An artistic principle?

The musician sees this initially as an artistic principle, and not an especially interesting one. It may perhaps help him to set his texts in a particularly lively and easily assimilated way. What is more important is the fact that this principle of looking to the gestus can allow him to adopt his own political attitude while making music. For that it is essential that he should be setting a social gestus.

### 3. What is a social gestus?

Not every gestus is a social gestus. The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gestus, although the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one, for instance, if it comes to represent a badly dressed man’s continual battle against watchdogs. Someone’s efforts to stay balanced on a slippery surface results in a social gestus as soon as falling down would mean ‘losing face’; in other words, losing market value. The gestus of working is definitely a social gestus, because all human activity directed towards the mastery of nature is a social undertaking, an undertaking between people. On the other hand a gestus of pain, as long as it is kept so abstract and generalized that it does not rise above a purely animal category, is not yet a social gestus. But this is precisely the common tendency of art: to remove the social element in any gestus. The artist is not happy till he achieves ‘the look of a hunted animal’. The man then becomes just Man with a capital M; his gestus is stripped of any social individuality; it is an empty one, not representing any undertaking or operation among people by this particular person. The ‘look of a hunted animal’ can become a social gestus if it is shown

that particular manoeuvres by human beings can degrade the individual human to the level of a beast; the social gestus is the gestus relevant to society, the gestus that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances.

#### *4. How can the composer's attitude to the text reflect his attitude to the class struggle?*

Suppose that the musician composing a cantata on Lenin's death has to reproduce his own attitude to the class struggle. As far as the gestus goes, there are a number of different ways in which the report of Lenin's death can be set. A certain dignity of presentation means little, because where death is involved, this could also be held to be fitting in the case of an enemy. Anger at 'the blind workings of nature' cutting short the lives of the best members of the community would not be a communist gestus; nor would a wise resignation to 'life's fate'; for the gestus of communists mourning a communist is a very special one. The musician's attitude to his text, the spokesman's to his report, shows the extent of his political and with it his human maturity. A person's stature is shown by the object of mourning and the manner of mourning it. To raise mourning to a high plane, to make it into an element of social progress: that is an artistic task.

#### *5. Inhumanity of subject matter in itself*

Every artist knows that subject matter in itself is in a sense somewhat banal, featureless, empty and self-sufficient. Only the social gestus – criticism, craftiness, irony, propaganda and so on – breathes humanity into it. The pomp of the fascists, taken at its face value, has a hollow gestus, the gestus of mere pomp, a featureless phenomenon: people strutting instead of walking, a certain stiffness, a lot of colour, self-conscious sticking out of chests and so on. All this could be the gestus of some popular festivity, quite harmless, purely factual and therefore to be accepted. Only when the strutting takes place over corpses do we get the social gestus of fascism. This means that the artist has to adopt a definite attitude towards the fact of pomp; he cannot let it just speak only for itself, simply expressing it as the fact dictates.

#### *6. A criterion*

A good criterion for judging a piece of music with a text is to try out the attitude or gestus with which the performer ought to deliver the individual sections: politely or angrily, modestly or contemptuously, approvingly or argumentatively, craftily or without calculation. For this the most suitable gestures are as common, vulgar and banal as possible. In this way you can judge

the political value of the musical score.

[‘Über gestische Musik’, BFA 22/329-31]

Typescript, written in July/August 1937. During his visit in Denmark in August 1937, Hanns Eisler set to music Brecht’s ‘Cantata for Lenin’s death’ (‘Kantate zu Lenins Todestag’, in the collection *Svendborg Poems*). Presumably Brecht hoped to inspire Eisler with this text.

### **On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms**

Sometimes on publishing unrhymed verse I was asked how on earth I could present such stuff as verse; this happened most recently with my ‘German Satires’. It is a fair question, as it is usual for verse that does without rhyme to offer at least a strong rhythm. Many of my most recent works in verse have had neither rhyme nor any regular, strong rhythm. The reason I give for labelling them verse is: because they have a (shifting, syncopated, gestic) rhythm, even if not a regular one. My first book of poems contained virtually nothing but songs and ballads, and the verse forms were fairly regular; they were nearly all supposed to be singable, and in the simplest possible way: I set them to music myself. There was only one poem without rhymes, and it was rhythmically regular; the rhymed poems on the other hand nearly all had irregular rhythms. In the nineteen stanzas of the ‘Ballad of the dead soldier’ there were nine different scansion of each stanza’s second line. [The examples quoted are from stanzas 1–6, 14, 15 and 18.]

After that I wrote a play (*In the Jungle of Cities*) making use of Arthur Rimbaud’s heightened prose (from his *Une Saison en Enfer*). For another play (*The Life of Edward II of England*) I had to tackle the problem of iambics. I had been struck with the greater force of the actors’ delivery when they used the almost unreadable, ‘halting’ verses of the old Schlegel and Tieck Shakespeare translation rather than Rothe’s smooth new one. How much better it expressed the tussle of thoughts in the great monologues! How much richer the architecture of the verse! The problem was simple: I needed elevated language, but was brought up against the oily smoothness of the usual five-foot iambic metre. I needed rhythm, but not the usual jingle. I went about it like this. Instead of:

I heard the drumbeats ring across the swamp  
Horses and weapons sank before my eyes  
And now my head is turning. Are they all  
Now drowned and dead? Does only noise still hang  
Hollow and idle on the air? But I  
Should not be running.

I wrote:

With these beating drums, bog gulping  
Catapults and horses, my mother's-son's head  
Whirls. Don't pant! Are all  
Now drowned and done for and is there but noise  
Hanging now between earth and heaven? Nor will I  
Run any more.

This gave the jerky breath of a man running, and such syncopation did more to show the speaker's conflicting feelings. My political knowledge in those days was disgracefully slight, but I was aware of huge inconsistencies in people's social life, and I did not think it my task formally to iron out all the discordances and interferences of which I was strongly conscious. I caught them up in the incidents of my plays and in the verses of my poems; and did so long before I had recognized their real character and causes. As can be seen from the texts, it was a matter not just of 'swimming against the current' in a formal sense – of a protest against the smoothness and harmony of conventional poetry – but already of an attempt to show human dealings as contradictory, fiercely fought over, full of violence.

I could be still freer in my approach when I wrote opera, *Lehrstück* or cantata for modern composers. There I gave up iambics entirely and applied strong but irregular rhythms. Composers of the most varied schools assured me, and I myself could see, that they were admirably suited for music.

After that, alongside ballads and mass choruses with rhymes and regular (or almost regular) rhythms, I wrote more and more poems with no rhymes and with irregular rhythms. It must be remembered that the bulk of my work was designed for the theatre; I was always thinking of actual delivery. And for this delivery (whether of prose or of verse) I had worked out a quite definite technique. I called it 'gestic'.

This meant that the sentence must entirely follow the gestus of the person speaking. Let me give an example. The Bible's sentence 'pluck out the eye that offends thee' is based on a gestus – that of commanding – but it is not entirely gestically expressed, as 'that offends thee' has a further gestus that remains unexpressed, that of explanation. Purely gestically expressed, the sentence runs: 'if thine eye offends thee, pluck it out' (and this is how it was put by Luther, who 'watched the people's mouth'). It can be seen at a glance that this way of putting it is far richer and cleaner from a gestic point of view. The first clause contains an assumption, and its peculiarity and specialness can be fully expressed by the tone of voice. Then there is a little pause of bewilderment, and

only then the devastating proposal. The gestic way of putting things can of course quite well apply within a regular rhythm (or in a rhymed poem). Here is an example showing the difference:

Haven't you seen the child, unconscious yet of affection  
Warming and cherishing him, who moves from one arm to another  
Dozing, until the call of passion awakens the stripling  
And with consciousness's flame the dawning world is illumined?

(Schiller: 'The philosophical egoist')

And:

Nothing comes from nothing; not even the gods can deny it.  
So constrained by fear our poor mortality, always;  
So many things it sees appearing on earth or in heaven,  
Moved by some basic cause that itself is unable to compass,  
That it assumes some Power alone can be their creator.  
But when we've seen for ourselves that nothing can come out of nothing,  
Then we shall understand just what we are asking: the reason  
Why all these things arose without divine intervention.

(Lucretius: *De rerum natura*)

The lack of gestic elements in Schiller's poem and the wealth of them in Lucretius's can be easily confirmed by repeating the verses aloud and observing how often the gestus changes in the process.

I began speaking of the gestic way of putting things because although this can be achieved within our regular rhythmical framework, it seems to me at present that irregular rhythms without the gestic way of putting things did not seem possible. I remember two observations helping me to work out irregular rhythms. The first related to those short, improvised chants at workers' demonstrations, which I first heard one Christmas Eve. A procession of proletarians was marching through the respectable Western districts of Berlin shouting the sentence 'We are hungry' ('Wir haben Hunger'). The rhythm was this:

— — — — —

Wir ha-ben Hun-ger

I subsequently heard other similar chants, just with an easily spoken and disciplined text. One of them ran 'Help yourselves: vote for Thälmann'.

— — — — —

Helft euch sel-ber, wählt Thälmann.

Another experience of rhythm with a popular origin was the cry of 'Textbook for the opera *Fratella* to be given on the radio tonight', which I heard a Berlin streetseller calling as he sold libretti outside the Kaufhaus des Westens. He gave it the following rhythm:

— — — — — — — — — — — — — — — — —

Text-buch für die O-per Fra tel-la wel-che heu-te A-bend im Rund-

— — — — —

funk ge-hört wird

He continually varied the pitch and the volume, but stuck insistently to the rhythm.

The newspaper seller's technique of rhythmical cries is easily studied.

But irregular rhythms are also used in written matter, whenever it is a question of more or less hammering something in. [Two advertising slogans for German cigarettes and chocolate are then quoted and scanned.] These experiences were applied to the development of irregular rhythms. What do these irregular rhythms look like, then? Here is an example from the 'German Satires': the two last verses from 'Die Jugend und das Dritte Reich'.

Ja, wenn die Kinder Kinder blieben, dann

Könnte man ihnen immer Märchen erzählen

Da sie aber älter werden

Kann man es nicht.

[Ah yes, if children only remained children, then

One could always tell them stories

But since they grow older  
One cannot.]  
How does one read that?  
We start by superimposing it on a regular rhythm.

-----  
Ja wenn die Kin-der Kin-der blieben, dann

-----  
Könn-te man ih- nen im-mer Märchen er-zäh- len

-----  
Da sie a-ber äl-ter wer-den

-----  
Kann man es nicht.

The missing syllables [Brecht writes ‘feet’, but clearly means syllables] must be allowed for when speaking either by prolonging the previous syllable [‘foot’] or by pauses. The division into lines helps that. The end of a line always creates a break. I picked this particular strophe because if one splits its second line in two:

Könnte man ihnen  
Immer Märchen erzählen

it becomes still easier to read, so that the principle can be studied in a borderline case. The effect on sound and emphasis of this division can be seen in the last strophe:

When the regime rubs its hands and speaks of Youth  
It is like a man, who  
Looking at the snowy hillside, rubs his hands and says:  
How cold it’ll be this summer, with  
So much snow.

when it is divided differently, thus:

When the regime rubs its hands and speaks of Youth

It is like a man  
Who, looking at the snowy hillside, rubs his hands and says:  
How cold it'll be this summer  
With so much snow.

This way of writing can in fact be read rhythmically too. But the qualitative difference catches the eye. In general, it must be admitted that this free way of treating verse strongly tempts the writer to be formless: the quality of the rhythm is not even guaranteed to the same extent as with a regular rhythmical scheme (although with this the right number of feet does not necessarily produce rhythm). The proof of the pudding is simply in the eating.

It must also be admitted that at the moment the reading of irregular rhythms presents one or two difficulties. This seems to me no criticism of it, however. Our ear is certainly in the process of being physiologically transformed. Our acoustic environment has changed immensely. An episode in an American feature film, when the dancer Astaire tap danced to the sounds of a machine room, showed the astonishingly close relationship between the new noises and the percussive rhythms of jazz. Jazz signified a broad flow of popular musical elements into modern music, whatever our commercialized world may have made of it since. Its connection with the emancipation of the Negroes is well known.

The extremely healthy campaign against formalism has made possible the *productive* development of artistic forms by showing that the development of social content is an absolutely essential precondition for it. Unless it subordinates itself to this development of content, unless it accepts the mandate from it, any formal innovation will remain unfruitful.

The 'German Satires' were written for the German Freedom Radio. It was a matter of projecting single sentences to a distant, artificially scattered audience. They had to be cut down to the most concise possible form and to be reasonably invulnerable to interruptions (by jamming). Rhyme seemed to me to be unsuitable, as it easily makes a poem seem self-contained, lets it glide past the ear. Regular rhythms with their even cadence fail in the same way to cut deep enough, and they impose circumlocutions; a lot of everyday expressions won't fit them; the tone of direct and spontaneous speech was needed. Rhymeless verse with irregular rhythms seemed suitable.

[*'Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmässigen Rhythmen'*, BFA 22/357-64]

Brecht wrote this essay in March 1938 for the exile journal *Das Wort*, a monthly German-language review published in Moscow that he co-edited with two others



from July 1936 to its last number in March 1939. His typescript included the following introductory paragraph:

Several journals, among them *Das Wort*, have recently featured extensive discussions that – despite all the differences in points of view – reveal nonetheless a unified opinion: certain formalistic tendencies must be rejected if we are seeking a literature with social impact. The attempt is being made to ascertain how some formal elements weaken the impact of literary works and convey an incorrect image of reality. Because the discussion has remained rather general and the guidelines rather vague, many readers have the impression that it is necessary to reject any use of new forms and to halt the discussion entirely. Of course this is not the point. Even if beyond the beginnings of a Marxist literary criticism there were the beginnings of a Marxist aesthetics, it would never declare the development of artistic forms to be finished. The numerous submissions of poetry to the editors of *Das Wort* show, for example, that detailed analyses of lyric forms are very necessary. The following brief study aims at clarifying only one of the many issues.

One year later Brecht's essay was published in the last issue of the journal (No. 3) in March 1939, but without the introduction. The verse examples have been turned into English wherever a translation can still carry Brecht's point. Brecht's first book of poems was *Die Hauspostille (The Domestic Breviary)*; Berlin 1927). He adapted *The Life of Edward II of England* from Marlowe in collaboration with Lion Feuchtwanger; the lines quoted are from Gaveston's speech just before his capture and bear little relation to Marlowe's 'Yet, lusty lords, I have escaped your hands ....' The standard translation of Shakespeare into German was accomplished by August Wilhelm von Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck (1797–1810); Hans Rothe was a modern translator whose versions (1924–6) were used by Max Reinhardt. Ernst Thälmann was the head of the German Communist Party in the Weimar Republic and a candidate for the presidency in 1932; he was arrested by the Gestapo in 1933 and executed in Buchenwald in 1944. The Kaufhaus des Westens is a big Berlin department store. The 'German Satires' appeared in part five of the *Svenborger Gedichte (Svendborg Poems)*, London, 1939). The anti-Nazi German Freedom Radio (29,8 on the dial) operated from Madrid between January 1937 and March 1939. The indication at the end of the essay that Brecht approved of the anti-formalism campaign of the 1930s, given his own interpretation of formalism, is the only indication that he approved of it at all. The great majority of the *Svendborg Poems* are written in the style

described in this essay.

## The Street Scene

### *A basic model for an epic theatre (1940)*

In the decade and a half that followed the World War a comparatively new way of acting was tried out in a number of German theatres. Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name of 'epic'. The actors used a somewhat complex technique to detach themselves from the characters portrayed; they forced the spectators to look at the play's situations from such an angle that they necessarily became subject to criticism. Supporters of this epic theatre argued that the new subject matter, the highly involved incidents of the class struggle in its acutest and most terrible stage, would be mastered more easily by such a method, because it would thereby become possible to portray social processes as seen in their causal relationships. But the result of these experiments was that aesthetics found itself up against a whole series of substantial difficulties.

It is comparatively easy to set up a basic model for epic theatre. For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple, 'natural' epic theatre an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behaviour of driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident.

Such an example of the most primitive type of epic theatre seems easy to understand. Yet experience has shown that it presents astounding difficulties to the readers or listeners as soon as they are asked to see the implications of treating this kind of street corner demonstration as a basic form of major theatre, theatre for a scientific age. What this means, of course, is that the epic theatre may appear richer, more intricate and complex in every particular, yet to be major theatre it basically needs only to contain the same elements as a street-corner demonstration of this sort; nor could it any longer be termed epic theatre if any of the main elements of the street-corner demonstration were lacking. Until this is understood, it is impossible to really understand what follows. Until you understand that the novelty, unfamiliarity and direct challenge to the critical faculties of the suggestion that a street-corner demonstration of this sort can serve as a satisfactory basic model of major theatre, you cannot really

understand what follows.

Consider: the incident is clearly very far from what we mean by an artistic one. The demonstrator need not be an artist. The capacities needed to achieve his aim are in effect universal. Suppose he cannot carry out some particular movement as quickly as the victim he is imitating; all he need do is to explain that he moves three times as fast, and the demonstration neither suffers in essentials nor loses its point. On the contrary it is important that he should not be too perfect. His demonstration would be spoilt if the bystanders' attention were drawn to his powers of transformation. He has to avoid presenting himself in such a way that someone calls out: What a lifelike portrayal of a driver! He must not 'cast a spell' over anyone. He should not transport people from normality to 'higher realms'. He need not dispose of any special powers of suggestion.

It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from our *street scene*: the engendering of *illusion*. The street demonstrator's performance is essentially repetitive. The event has taken place; what you are seeing now is a repeat. If the *theatre scene* follows the *street scene* in this respect, then the theatre will stop pretending not to be theatre, just as the street-corner demonstration admits it is a demonstration (and does not pretend to be the actual event). The element of rehearsal in the acting and of memorizing the text, the whole machinery and the whole process of preparation: it all becomes plainly apparent. What room is left for *experience*? Is the reality portrayed still experienced in any sense?

The *street scene* determines what kind of *experience* is to be prepared for the spectator. There is no question but that the street-corner demonstrator has been through an 'experience', but he is not out to make his demonstration serve as an 'experience' for the audience. Even the experience of the driver and the victim is only partially communicated by him, and he by no means tries to turn it into an enjoyable experience for the spectator, however lifelike he may make his demonstration. The demonstration would become no less valid, for example, if he did not reproduce the fear caused by the accident; on the contrary *it would lose validity* if he did. He is not interested in creating pure *emotions*. It is important to understand that a theatre, in following his lead in this respect, undergoes a positive change of function.

One essential element of the *street scene* must also be present in the *theatre scene*, if this is to qualify as epic: the demonstration should have a socially practical significance. Whether our street demonstrator is out to show that one attitude on the part of driver or pedestrian makes an accident inevitable where another would not, or whether he is demonstrating with a view to clarifying the question of guilt, his demonstration has a practical purpose, intervenes socially.

The demonstrator's purpose determines how thoroughly he has to imitate. Our demonstrator need not imitate every aspect of his characters' behaviour, but only so much as gives a picture. Generally the *theatre scene* will give much fuller pictures, corresponding to its more extensive range of interests. How do *street scene* and *theatre scene* link up here? To take a point of detail, the victim's voice may have played no immediate part in the accident. Eyewitnesses may disagree as to whether a cry they heard ('Look out') came from the victim or from someone else, and this may give our demonstrator a motive for imitating the voice. The question can be settled by demonstrating whether the voice was an old man's or a woman's, or merely whether it was high or low. Again, the answer may depend on whether it was that of an educated person or not. Loud or soft may play a great part, as the driver could be correspondingly more or less guilty. A whole series of characteristics of the victim ask to be portrayed. Was he absent-minded? Was his attention distracted? If so, by what? What, on the evidence of his behaviour, could have made him liable to be distracted by just that circumstance and no other? And so on and so forth. It can be seen that our street-corner demonstration provides opportunities for a pretty rich and varied portrayal of human types. Yet a theatre that tries to restrict its essential elements to those provided by our *street scene* will have to acknowledge certain limits to imitation. It must be able to justify any outlay in terms of its purpose.<sup>4</sup>

The demonstration may, for instance, be dominated by the question of *compensation* for the victim and so on. The driver risks being sacked from his job, losing his licence, going to prison; the victim risks a heavy hospital bill, loss of job, permanent disfigurement, possibly unfitness for work. This is the area within which the demonstrator builds up his characters. The victim may have had a companion; the driver may have had his girl sitting alongside him. That would bring out the *social element* better and allow the characters to be more fully drawn.

Another essential element in the *street scene* is that the demonstrator should derive his characters entirely from their actions. He imitates their actions and so allows conclusions to be drawn about them. A theatre that follows him in this will be largely breaking with the orthodox theatre's habit of basing the actions on the characters and having the former exempted from criticism by presenting them as an unavoidable consequence deriving by natural law from the characters who perform them. To the street demonstrator the *character* of the person being demonstrated remains a quantity that need not be completely defined. Within certain limits he may be like this or like that; it doesn't matter. The demonstrator is concerned with his accident-prone and accident-proof qualities.<sup>5</sup> The *theatre*

*scene* may show more fully defined individuals. But it must then be in a position to treat their individuality as a special case and outline the field within which, once more, its most socially relevant effects are produced. Our street demonstrator's possibilities of demonstration are narrowly restricted (indeed, we chose this model so that the limits should be as narrow as possible). If the essential elements of the *theatre scene* are limited to those of the *street scene*, then its greater richness must be an enrichment only. The question of *borderline cases* becomes acute.

Let us take a specific detail. Can our street demonstrator, say, ever be in a position to use an *excited* tone of voice in repeating the driver's statement that he has been exhausted by too long a spell of work? (In theory this is no more possible than for a returning messenger to start telling his fellow countrymen of his talk with the king with the words 'I saw the bearded king'.) It can only be possible, let alone unavoidable, if we imagine a street-corner situation where such excitement, specifically about this aspect of the affair, plays a particular part. (In the instance above this would be so if the king had sworn never to cut his beard off until ... and so on.) We have to find a point of view for our demonstrator that allows him to submit this excitement to criticism. Only if he adopts a quite definite point of view will he be in a position to imitate the driver's excited voice, for example, if he blames drivers as such for doing too little to reduce their hours of work. ('Look at him. Doesn't even belong to a union, but gets worked up soon enough when an accident happens. "Ten hours I've been at the wheel."')

Before it can get this far, that is, suggest a point of view to the actor, the theatre needs to take a number of steps. By widening its field of vision and showing the driver in other situations besides that of the accident, the theatre in no way exceeds its model; it merely creates a further situation on the same pattern. We can imagine a scene of the same kind as the *street scene* that provides a well-argued demonstration showing how such emotions as the driver's develop, or another that involves making comparisons between tones of voice. In order not to exceed the model scene, the theatre only has to develop in each case a technique for submitting emotions to the spectator's criticism. Of course this does not mean that the spectator must be barred on principle from sharing certain emotions that are put forward; none the less to communicate emotions is only one particular form (phase, consequence) of criticism. The theatre's demonstrator, the actor, must apply a technique that will let him reproduce the tone of the subject demonstrated with a certain reserve, with detachment (so that the spectator can say: 'He's getting excited – in vain, too late, at last ....' and so on). In short, the actor must remain a demonstrator; he

must present the person demonstrated as a stranger, he must not eliminate the ‘*he did that, he said that*’ element in his performance. He must not go so far as to be *completely transformed* into the person demonstrated.

One essential element of the *street scene* lies in the natural attitude adopted by the demonstrator, which is twofold; he is always taking two situations into account. He behaves naturally as a demonstrator, and he lets the subject of the demonstration behave naturally too. He never forgets, nor does he allow it to be forgotten, that he is not the subject but the demonstrator. That is to say, what the audience sees is not a fusion between demonstrator and subject, not some third, independent, uncontradictory entity with isolated features of (a) demonstrator and (b) subject, such as the orthodox theatre puts before us in its productions.<sup>6</sup> The feelings and opinions of demonstrator and demonstrated are not synchronized.

We now come to one of those elements that are peculiar to the epic theatre, the so-called V-effect (*Verfremdung* effect). Briefly, this is a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, that is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this ‘effect’ is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view. Can we show that this V-effect is significant for our street demonstrator?

We can picture what happens if he fails to make use of it. The following situation could occur. One of the spectators might say: But if the victim stepped off the curb with his right foot, as you showed him doing .... The demonstrator might interrupt saying: I showed him stepping off with his left foot. By arguing about which foot he really stepped off with in his demonstration, and, even more, about how the victim himself acted, the demonstration can be so transformed that the V-effect occurs. The demonstrator achieves it by paying exact attention to his movements this time, executing them carefully, probably in slow motion; in this way he estranges the little sub-incident, emphasizes its importance, makes it worthy of notice. And so the epic theatre’s *Verfremdung* effect proves to have its uses for our street demonstrator too; in other words it is also to be found in this small, everyday scene of natural street-corner theatre, which has little to do with art. The direct changeover from representation to commentary that is so characteristic of the epic theatre is still more easily recognized as one element of any street demonstration. Wherever he feels he can, the demonstrator breaks off his imitation in order to give explanations. The epic theatre’s choruses and documentary projections, the actors directly addressing the audience, are basically just this.

It will have been observed, not without astonishment I hope, that I have not

named any strictly *artistic* elements as characterizing our *street scene* and, with it, that of the *epic theatre*. The street demonstrator can carry out a successful demonstration with no greater abilities than, in effect, anybody has. What about the *epic theatre's value as art*?

The epic theatre wants to establish its basic model at the street corner, that is, to return to the very simplest, 'natural' theatre, a social enterprise whose origins, means and ends are practical and material. The model works without any need of programmatic theatrical phrases like 'the urge to self-expression', 'making a part your own', 'spiritual experience', 'the play instinct', 'the storyteller's art', *etc.* Does that mean that the *epic theatre* is not concerned with art?

We might just as well begin by putting the question differently, thus: can we make use of artistic abilities for the purposes of our *street scene*? Obviously yes. Even the street-corner demonstration includes artistic elements. Artistic abilities in some small degree are to be found in every human being. It does no harm to remember this when we are confronted with great art. Undoubtedly what we call artistic abilities can be exercised at any time within the limits imposed by our *street scene* model. They will function as artistic abilities, even though they do not exceed these limits (for instance, when there is meant to be no *complete transformation* of demonstrator into subject). And true enough, the *epic theatre* is an extremely artistic affair, hardly thinkable without artists and virtuosity, imagination, humour and compassion; it cannot be practised without all these and much else too. It has got to be entertaining, it has got to be instructive. How then can *art* be developed out of the elements of the *street scene*, without adding any or leaving any out? How does it evolve into the *theatre scene* with its fabricated plot, its trained actors, its lofty style of speaking, its make-up, its team performance by a number of players? Do we need to add to our elements in order to move on from the 'natural' demonstration to the 'artificial'?

Is it not true that the additions we must make to our model in order to arrive at *epic theatre* are of a more fundamental kind? A brief examination will show that they are not. Take the *plot*. There was nothing fabricated about our street accident. Nor does the orthodox theatre deal only in fabrications; think for instance of the historical play. None the less a plot can be performed at the street corner too. Our demonstrator may at any time be in a position to say: The driver was guilty, because it all happened the way I showed you. He wouldn't be guilty, if it had happened the way I'm going to show you now. And he can fabricate an incident and demonstrate it. Or take the fact that the *text is memorized*. As a witness in a court case, the demonstrator may have written down the subject's exact words, memorized them and rehearsed them; in that case he too is performing a text he has learned. Or take a rehearsed programme

by *several* players: it does not always have to be artistic purposes that bring about a demonstration of this sort; just think of the French police technique of making the chief figures in any criminal case re-enact certain crucial situations before a police audience. Or take *making-up*. Minor changes in appearance – rumpling the hair, for instance – can occur at any time within the framework of the non-artistic type of demonstration. Nor is make-up itself used solely for theatrical purposes. In the *street scene* the driver's moustache may be particularly significant. It may have influenced the testimony of the possible girl companion suggested earlier. This can be represented by our demonstrator making the driver stroke an imaginary moustache when prompting his companion's evidence. In this way the demonstrator can do a good deal to discredit her as a witness. Moving on to the use of a real moustache in the *theatre scene*, however, is not an entirely easy transition, and the same difficulty occurs with respect to *costume*. Our demonstrator may under given circumstances put on the driver's cap – for instance, if he wants to show that he was drunk (he had it on crooked) – but he can only do so conditionally, under these circumstances (see what was said about *borderline cases* earlier!). However, where there is a demonstration by several demonstrators of the kind referred to above, we can have costumes so that the various characters can be distinguished. This again is only a limited use of costume. There must be no question of creating an illusion that the demonstrators really are these characters. (The *epic theatre* can counteract this illusion by especially exaggerated costume or by garments that are somehow marked out as objects for display.) Moreover, we can suggest another model as a substitute for ours on this point: the kind of street demonstration given by hawkers. To sell their neckties these people will portray a badly dressed and a dashing man; with a few props and technical tricks they can perform insinuating little scenes where they submit essentially to the same restrictions as apply to the demonstrator in our street scene (they will pick up tie, hat, stick, gloves and give certain insinuating imitations of a man of the world, and the whole time they will refer to him as 'he'!) With hawkers we also find *verse* being used within the same framework as that of our basic model. They use strong, irregular rhythms to sell braces and newspapers alike.

Reflecting along these lines, we see that our basic model will work. The elements of natural and of artificial *epic theatre* are the same. Our street-corner theatre is primitive; origins, aims and methods of its performance are 'close to home'. But there is no doubt that it is a meaningful phenomenon with a clear social function that dominates all its elements. The performance's origins lie in an incident that can be judged one way or another, that may repeat itself in



different forms and is not finished but is bound to have consequences, so that this judgement has some significance. The object of the performance is to make it easier to give an opinion on the incident. Its means correspond to that. The *epic theatre* is a highly artistic theatre with complex contents and far-reaching social objectives. In setting up the *street scene* as a basic model for *epic theatre*, we pass on the clear social function and give the *epic theatre* criteria by which to decide whether an incident is meaningful or not. The basic model has a practical significance. As producer and actors work to build up a performance involving many difficult questions – technical problems, social ones – it allows them to check whether the social function of the whole apparatus is still clearly intact.

[‘*Die Strassenszene*’, BFA 22/370-81]

Written in June 1938, first published in *Versuche* 10 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1950). This is an elaboration of a poem ‘Über alltägliches Theater’ (‘On everyday theatre’, see *Poems 1913–1956*, pp. 176–9) written in 1935. The notion of the man at the street-corner miming an accident is already developed at length there, and it also occurs in a fragmentary note from early 1937 about the work of the set designer.

### **Short Description of a New Technique of Acting That Produces a *Verfremdung* Effect**

What follows represents an attempt to describe a technique of acting that was applied in certain theatres (1) with a view to taking the incidents portrayed and estranging them from the spectators. The aim of this technique, known as the *Verfremdung* effect, was to make the spectators adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in their approach to the incident. The means were artistic.

The first condition for the V-effect’s application to this end is that stage and auditorium must be purged of everything ‘magical’ and that no ‘hypnotic tensions’ should be set up. This ruled out any attempt to make the stage convey the atmosphere of a particular place (a room at evening, a road in the autumn) (2), or to create mood by relaxing the rhythm of the conversation. The audience was not ‘worked up’ by a display of temperament nor was a ‘spell cast’ by acting with tautened muscles; in short, no attempt was made to put it in a trance and give it the illusion of watching an ordinary unrehearsed event. As will be seen presently, the audience’s tendency to plunge into such illusions has to be checked by specific artistic means (3).

The first condition for the achievement of the V-effect is that the actors must invest what they have to show with a definite *gestus* of showing. It is of course

necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience. That being so, it is possible for the actor in principle to address the audience directly (4).

It is well known that contact between audience and stage is normally made on the basis of *empathy*. Conventional actors devote their efforts so exclusively to bringing about this psychological operation that they may be said to see it as the principal aim of their art (5). Our introductory remarks will already have made it clear that the technique producing a V-effect is the exact opposite of that aiming at empathy. The actors applying it are bound not to try to bring about the empathy operation.

Yet in their efforts to reproduce particular characters and show their behaviour, the actors need not renounce the means of empathy entirely. They use these means just as any normal person with no particular acting talent would use them to portray someone else, that is, to show how the person behaves. This showing of other people's behaviour happens time and again in ordinary life (witnesses of an accident demonstrating to newcomers how the victim behaved, a facetious person imitating a friend's walk and so on), without those involved making the least effort to subject their spectators to an illusion. At the same time they do feel their way into their characters' skins with a view to acquiring their characteristics.

As has already been said, the actors too will make use of this psychological operation. But whereas the usual practice in acting is to execute it during the actual performance in the hope of stimulating the spectators into a similar operation, they will achieve it only at an earlier stage, at some time when working on the parts during rehearsals.

To safeguard against an unduly 'impulsive', frictionless and uncritical creation of characters and incidents, more reading rehearsals can be held than usual. The actors should refrain from prematurely immersing themselves in the parts in any way and should go on functioning as long as possible as readers (not as someone reading aloud). An important step is *memorizing the first impressions*.

When reading their parts the actors' attitude should be one of a person who is astounded and contradicted. Not only the occurrence of the incidents, as they read about them, but the conduct of the persons they are playing, as they experience it, must be weighed and the peculiarities understood; none can be taken as given, as something that 'was bound to turn out that way', that was 'only to be expected from a character like that'. Before memorizing the words they must memorize what astonished them and where they felt impelled to contradict. For these are

dynamic forces that they must preserve in creating the performance.

When they appear on the stage, besides what the actors actually are doing they will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what they are not doing; that is to say, they will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that their acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants. An actor will say, for instance, 'You'll pay for that', and does *not* say 'I forgive you'. He detests his children; it is *not* the case that he loves them. He moves down stage left and *not* up stage right. Whatever he does *not* do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is: fixing the *not – but*.

The actors do not allow themselves to become *completely transformed* on the stage into the characters they are portraying. An actor is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he *shows* them. He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of humankind; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation. Actors will know what it means if I say that a typical kind of acting without this complete transformation takes place when a producer or colleague demonstrates how to play a particular passage. It is not his own part, so he is not completely transformed; he underlines the technical aspect and retains the attitude of someone just making suggestions (6).

Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned the actors speak their parts not as if they were improvising it themselves but like a quotation (7). At the same time they obviously have to render all the quotation's overtones, the remark's full human and concrete expressivity; similarly each gesture they make must have the full embodiment of a human gesture, even though it now represents a copy (8).

Given this absence of total transformation in the acting, there are three aids that may serve the *Verfremdung* of the actions and remarks of the characters being portrayed:

1. *Transposition into the third person.*
2. *Transposition into the past.*
3. *Speaking the stage directions and commentaries out loud.*

Using the third person and the past tense allows the actors to adopt the right attitude of detachment. In addition they will look for stage directions and remarks that comment on their lines, and speak them aloud at rehearsal ('He

stood up and exclaimed angrily, not having eaten: ... ' or 'He had never been told so before, and didn't know if it was true or not' or 'He smiled, and said with forced nonchalance: ... '). Speaking the stage directions out loud in the third person results in a clash between two tones of voice, estranging the second of them, the text proper. This style of acting is further estranged by taking place on the stage after having already been outlined and announced in words. Transposing it into the past gives the speaker a standpoint from which to look back at a sentence. The sentence too is thereby estranged without the speaker adopting an unreal point of view; unlike the spectators, the actors have read the play right through and are better placed to judge a sentence in accordance with the ending, with its consequences, than the former, who know less and are more strangers to the sentence.

This composite process leads to a *Verfremdung* of the text in the rehearsals that generally persists in the performance too (9). The directness of the relationship with the audience allows and indeed forces the actual speech delivery to be varied in accordance with the greater or smaller significance attached to the sentences. Take the case of witnesses addressing a court. The underlinings, the characters' insistence on their remarks, must be developed as a piece of effective virtuosity. If the actor turns to the audience, it must be a whole-hearted turn rather than the asides and soliloquizing technique of the old-fashioned theatre. To get the full V-effect from the poetic medium, the actor should start at rehearsal by paraphrasing the verse's content in vulgar prose, possibly accompanying this by the gestures designed for the verse. A daring and beautiful architecture of verbal forms will estrange the text. (Prose can be estranged by translation into the actor's native dialect.)

Gesture will be dealt with below, but it can be said at once that everything to do with the emotions has to be externalized; that is to say, it must be developed into a gesture. Actors must find a sensibly perceptible outward expression for their characters' emotions, preferably some action that gives away what is going on inside. The emotion in question must be brought out, must lose all its restrictions so that it can be treated on a big scale. Special elegance, power and grace of gesture bring about the V-effect.

A masterly use of gesture can be seen in Chinese acting. Chinese actors achieve the V-effect by visibly observing their own movements.

Whatever the actors offer in the way of gesture, verse structure and so on must be finished and bear the hallmarks of something rehearsed and rounded-off. The impression to be given is one of ease, which is at the same time one of difficulties overcome. The actors must make it possible for the audience to take their art, their mastery of technique, lightly too. They put an incident before the

spectator with perfection and as they think it really happened or might have happened. They do not conceal the fact that they have rehearsed it, any more than acrobats conceal their training, and they emphasize that it is the actors' account, view, version of the incident (11).

Because they do not identify themselves with them, actors can pick a definite attitude to adopt towards the characters whom they portray, can show what they think of them and invite the spectators, who are likewise not asked to identify, to criticize the characters portrayed (12).

The attitude that they adopt is a *socially critical* one. In the exposition of the incidents and in the characterization of the persons the actors try to bring out those features that come within society's sphere. In this way their performance becomes a discussion (about social conditions) with the audience they are addressing. They prompt the spectators to justify or abolish these conditions according to the class to which they belong (13).

The object of the V-effect is to estrange the social gestus underlying every incident. By social gestus is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period (14).

It helps to formulate the incident for society, and to put it across in such a way that society is given the key, if titles are thought up for the scenes. These titles must have a historical quality.

This brings us to a crucial technical device: *historicization*.

The actor must play the incidents as historical ones. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and universally human; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view. The conduct of those born before us is alienated [*entfremdet*] from us by an incessant evolution.

It is up to the actors to treat present-day events and modes of behaviour with the same detachment as historians adopt with regard to those of the past. They must estrange these characters and incidents from us.

Characters and incidents from ordinary life, from our immediate surroundings, being familiar, strike us as more or less natural. *Verfremdung* helps to make them seem remarkable to us. Science has carefully developed a technique of getting irritated with the everyday, 'self-evident', universally accepted occurrence, and there is no reason why this infinitely useful attitude should not be taken over by art (17). It is an attitude that arose in science as a result of the growth in human productive powers. In art the same motive applies.

As for the emotions, the experimental use of the V-effect in the epic theatre's

German productions indicated that this way of acting too can stimulate them, although possibly a different class of emotion is involved from those of the orthodox theatre (18). A critical attitude on the audience's part is a thoroughly artistic one (19). Nor does the actual practice of the V-effect seem anything like as unnatural as its description. Of course it is a way of acting that has nothing to do with 'stylization' as commonly practised. The main advantage of the epic theatre with its V-effect, intended purely to show the world in such a way that it becomes manageable, is precisely its quality of being natural and material, its humour and its renunciation of all the mystical elements that have stuck to the orthodox theatre from the old days.

### **Appendix [selected notes]**

1. *The Life of Edward II of England* after Marlowe (Munich Kammerspiele).

*Drums in the Night* (Deutsches Theater, Berlin).

*The Threepenny Opera* (Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin). *Pioneers in Ingolstadt* (Theater am Schiffbauerdamm).

*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, opera (Aufricht's Kurfürstendammtheater, Berlin).

*Man Equals Man* (Staatstheater, Berlin). *The Decision* (Grosses Schauspielhaus, Berlin). *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schweik* (Piscator's Theater am Nollendorfplatz, Berlin).

*Pointed Heads and Round Heads* (Riddersalen, Copenhagen).

*Señora Carrar's Rifles* (Copenhagen, Paris).

*Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (Paris).

2. If a certain atmosphere is the object of representation in the epic theatre because it explains certain attitudes, then it must be estranged.

3. Examples of mechanical means: very brilliant illumination of the stage (since a half-lit stage plus a completely darkened auditorium makes the spectators less level-headed by preventing them from observing their neighbours and in turn hiding themselves from their neighbours' eyes) and also *making the sources of light visible*.

Making visible the sources of light

There is a point in showing the lighting apparatus openly, as it is one of the means of preventing an unwanted element of illusion; it scarcely disturbs the necessary concentration. If we light the actors and their performance in such a way that the lights themselves are within the spectators' field of vision, we

destroy part of their illusion of being present at a spontaneous, transitory, authentic, unrehearsed event. They see that arrangements have been made to show something; something is being repeated here under special conditions, for instance, in a very brilliant light. Displaying the actual lights is meant to be a counter to the old-fashioned theatre's efforts to hide them. No one would expect the lighting to be hidden at a sporting event, a boxing match for instance. Whatever the points of difference between the modern theatre's presentations and those of a sporting promoter, they do not include the same concealment of the sources of light as the old theatre found necessary.

(*Brecht: 'Stage Design in the Epic Theatre'.*)

#### 4. Relationship of the actors to their audience

The actors are supposed to relate to their audience in the most unfettered and direct way. They simply have something to communicate and perform, and everything should be subject to the attitude of communicating and performing. It makes no difference whether their communication and performance takes place among an audience in the street or in a parlor or on the stage, those boards that are measured up and reserved for communication and performance. It doesn't matter that they are in special coats and have make-up, the reasons for this can be explained before or afterwards. But by no means may the impression arise that in some distant time an appointment was made so that an incident among people would take place at an appointed hour, as if it were happening now without preparation and in a 'natural' way, an agreement including the fact that no agreement had been made. Here someone is appearing and shows something in public view, also *the showing itself*. An actor imitates another person, but not in such a way or to such an extent as if he were that other person, not with the intention to forget himself. His person maintains its normalcy, different from other persons, with its own traits, a person therefore who resembles all others who are observing.

#### 5. Compare these remarks by *Poul Reumert*, the best-known Danish actor:

If I feel I am *dying*, and if I *really* feel it, then so does everybody else; if I act as though I had a dagger in my hand, and am entirely filled by the one idea of killing the child, then everybody shudders ... The whole business is a matter of mental activity being communicated by emotions, or the other way round if you prefer it: a feeling so strong as to be an obsession, which is translated into thoughts. If it comes off, it is the most infectious thing in the world; anything external is then a matter of complete indifference.

And *Rapoport*, 'The Work of the Actor', *Theater Workshop*, October 1936:

On the stage the actor is surrounded entirely by fictions ... The actor must be able to regard all this as though it were true, as though he were convinced that all that surrounds him on the stage is a living reality and, along with himself, he must convince the audience as well. This is the central feature of our method of work on the part ... Take any object, a cap for example; lay it on the table or on the floor and try to regard it as though it were a rat; make believe that it is a rat, and not a cap ... Picture what sort of a rat it is; what size, colour? ... We thus commit ourselves to believe quite naively that the object before us is something other than it is and, at the same time, learn to compel the audience to believe.

This might be thought to be a course of instruction for conjurers, but in fact it is a course of acting, supposedly according to Stanislavsky's method. We wonder if a technique that equips an actor to make the audience see rats where there aren't any can really be all that suitable for disseminating the truth. Given enough alcohol, it doesn't take acting to persuade almost anybody that he is seeing rats: pink ones.

6. A good exercise consists of actors rehearsing their roles with other actors (a student, an actor of a different gender, a partner, a comedian, etc.). In this way the actors fix for themselves a demonstrative attitude. Moreover, it is good if the actors see their roles played by others, and the depiction by the comedian will be especially instructive.

#### 7. Quotation

Standing in a free and direct relationship to it, the actor allows his character to speak and move; he presents a report. He does not have to make us forget that the text is not spontaneous, but has been memorized, is a fixed quantity; the fact does not matter, as we anyway assume that the report is not about himself but about others. His attitude would be the same if he were simply speaking from his own memory. He quotes a character, he is the witness at a trial. Nothing stands in the way of making clear when the character is ready to speak words. His attitude has a certain contradiction in itself, when taken as a whole (if you consider what is standing and speaking on stage): the actor speaks in the past, the character in the present. There is another contradiction of great significance. There is no reason why the actor should not endow his figure with just those emotions that it should have; he himself is not cold, he too develops emotions,



but they are not necessarily the same as those of the character. Let's assume the character says something it believes to be true. The actor is able to express, must be able to express that it is untrue, or: that speaking this truth is ominous or something else.

8. The epic actor must accumulate far more material than has been the case till now. What he has to represent is no longer himself as king, himself as scholar, himself as gravedigger and so on, but just kings, scholars, gravediggers, which means that he has to look around him in the world of reality. Again, he has to learn how to imitate: something that is discouraged in modern acting on the grounds that it 'destroys individuality'.

9. The theatre can create the corresponding V-effect in the performance in a number of ways. The Munich production of *The Life of Edward II of England* for the first time had titles preceding the scenes, announcing the contents. The Berlin production of *The Threepenny Opera* had the titles of the songs projected while they were sung. The Berlin production of *Man Equals Man* had the actors' figures projected on big screens during the action.

11. This summarizing, compiling, continuing manner of acting can be observed best during rehearsals immediately preceding the performance when the actors 'go through the moves', that is, run through the blocking, only indicate the gestures, just strike the intonation. These rehearsals, often used for orientation when a role is recast, serve purely the actor's own understanding. Thus, it is necessary to think about turning to the audience, but not in a way that suggestively results in intensification. Observe the difference between suggestive and compelling, vivid acting.

12. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* Darwin complains that the study of expression is difficult because 'when we witness any deep emotion, our sympathy is so strongly excited that close observation is forgotten or rendered almost impossible'. This is where the artist's work begins, shaping conditions of deepest emotion so that the witness, the spectator, remains capable of observing.

13. Another thing that makes for freedom in the actors' relationship with the audience is that they do not treat it as an undifferentiated mass. They do not boil it down to a shapeless dumpling in the stockpot of the emotions. They do not address themselves to everybody alike; they allow the existing divisions within

the audience to continue, in fact they widen them. There are friends and enemies in the audience; the actors are friendly to the one group and hostile to the other. They take sides, not necessarily with the characters but, if not with them, then against them. (At least, that is the basic attitude, although it too must be variable and change according to what a character may say at different stages. There may, however, also be points at which everything is in the balance and the actors must withhold judgement, although this again must be expressly shown in the acting.)

14. If *King Lear* (in Act I, scene 1) tears up a map when he divides his kingdom between his daughters, then the act of division is estranged. Not only does it draw our attention to his kingdom, but by treating the kingdom so plainly as his own private property, he throws some light on the basis of the feudal idea of the family. In *Julius Caesar* the tyrant's murder by Brutus is estranged if during one of his monologues accusing Caesar of tyrannical motives he himself maltreats a slave waiting on him. Weigel as *Maria Stuart* suddenly took the crucifix hanging round her neck and used it to fan the air coquettishly. (See also 'Practice Scenes for Actors'.)

#### 17. The V-effect as a procedure in everyday life

Bringing forth the V-effect constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely practised way of drawing our own or someone else's attention to a thing, and it can be seen in education as well as in business conferences of one sort or another. The V-effect consists in turning the object of which we are to be made aware, to which our attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. The obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness, the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be, it will now be labelled as something unusual. A common use of the V-effect is when someone says: Have you ever really looked carefully at your watch? The questioner knows that I've looked at it often enough, but now the question deprives me of the sight that I've grown used to and that accordingly has nothing more to say to me. I used to look at it to see the time, but now – asked in this importunate way – I realize that I have given up seeing the watch itself with an astonished eye; and it is in many ways an astonishing piece of machinery. Similarly it is a *Verfremdung* effect of the simplest sort if a business discussion

starts off with the sentence: Have you ever considered what happens to the waste from your factory that is pumped into the river day in, day out? This waste wasn't just swept down the river unobserved; it was carefully channelled into the river; men and machines have worked on it; the river has changed colour, the waste has flowed away most conspicuously, but just as waste. It was superfluous to the process of manufacture, and now it is to become material for manufacture; our eye turns to it with interest. The asking of the question has estranged it, and intentionally so. The very simplest sentences that apply in the V-effect are those with 'not – but' (he did not say 'come in' but 'keep moving'. He was not pleased but angry). They include an expectation that is justified by experience but, in the event, disappointed. You might have thought that ... but you oughtn't to have thought it. There was not just one possibility but two; both are introduced, then the second one is estranged, then the first as well. To see your mother as a man's wife, you need a V-effect; this is provided, for instance, when you acquire a stepfather. If you see your teacher hounded by the bailiffs, a V-effect occurs: jerked out of a relationship in which the teacher seems strong, he is now pulled into one where he seems weak. A *Verfremdung* of the automobile takes place if, after driving a modern car for a long while, we drive an old Model T Ford. Suddenly we hear explosions once more; the motor works on the principle of combustion. We start feeling amazed that such a vehicle, indeed any vehicle not drawn by animal power, can move; in short, we understand cars, by looking at them as something strange, new, as a triumph of engineering and to that extent something unnatural. Nature, which certainly embraces the automobile, is suddenly imbued with an element of unnaturalness, and from now on this is an indelible part of the concept of nature.

The expression 'in fact' can likewise estrange a statement. (He wasn't in fact at home; he said he would be, but we didn't believe him and had a look; or again, we didn't think it possible for him not to be at home, but it was a fact.) The term 'actually' is just as conducive to *Verfremdung*. ('I don't actually agree'.) Similarly the Eskimo definition 'A car is a wingless aircraft that crawls along the ground' is a way of estranging the car.

In a sense the *Verfremdung* effect itself has been estranged by the above explanation; we have taken a common, recurrent, universally practised operation and tried to draw attention to it by illuminating its peculiarity. But we have achieved the effect only with those people who have truly ('in fact') grasped that it does 'not' result from every representation 'but' from certain ones: only 'actually' is it familiar.

18. About rational and emotional points of view

The rejection of empathy is not the result of a rejection of the emotions, nor does it lead to such. The crude aesthetic thesis that emotions can only be stimulated by means of empathy is wrong. None the less a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy has to apply a cautious criticism to the emotions that it aims at and incorporates.

Certain artistic tendencies like the provocative behaviour of Futurists and Dadaists and the freezing-up of music point to a crisis of the emotions. In the closing years of the Weimar Republic the post-war German drama already took a decisively rationalistic turn. Fascism's grotesque emphasis on the emotions, together perhaps with the no less important lapse in the rational element in Marxist aesthetics, led us to lay particular stress on the rational. Nevertheless there are many contemporary works of art where we can speak of a decline in emotional effectiveness due to their isolation from reason or its revival thanks to a stronger rationalist message. This will surprise no one who has not got a completely conventional idea of the emotions.

The emotions always have a quite definite class basis; the form they take at any time is historical, restricted and limited in specific ways. The emotions are in no sense universally human and timeless.

The linking of particular emotions with particular interests is not unduly difficult, so long as you simply look for the interests corresponding to the emotional effects of works of art. Anyone can see the colonial adventures of the Second Empire looming behind Delacroix's paintings and Rimbaud's 'Bateau Ivre'.

If you compare 'Bateau ivre', say, with Kipling's 'Ballad of East and West', you can see the difference between French mid-nineteenth century colonialism and British colonialism at the beginning of the twentieth. It is less easy to explain the effect that such poems have on ourselves, as Marx already noticed. Apparently emotions accompanying social progress will survive for a long time in human beings as emotions linked with interests, and in the case of works of art will do so more strongly than might have been expected, given that in the meantime contrary interests will have made themselves felt. Every step forward means the end of the previous step forward, because that is where it starts and goes on from. At the same time it makes use of this previous step, which in a sense survives in people's consciousness as a step forward, just as it survives in its effects in real life. This involves a most interesting type of generalization, a continual process of abstraction. Whenever the works of art handed down to us allow us to share the emotions of other people, of people of a bygone period, different social classes and so on, we have to conclude that we are partaking in interests that really were universally human. These people now dead represented the interests of classes that led to progress. It is a very different matter when

fascism today conjures up emotions on the grandest scale, which for most of the people who succumb to them are not determined by interest.

19. Is the critical attitude an inartistic one?

An old tradition leads people to treat a critical attitude as a predominantly negative one. Many see the difference between the scientific and artistic attitudes as lying precisely in their attitude to criticism. People cannot conceive of contradiction and detachment as being part of artistic appreciation. Of course, such appreciation normally includes a higher level, which appreciates critically, but the criticism here only applies to matters of technique; it is quite a different matter from being required to observe not a representation of the world but the world itself in a critical, contradictory, detached manner.

To introduce this critical attitude into art, the negative element that it doubtless includes must be shown from its positive side: this criticism of the world is active, practical, positive. Criticizing the course of a river means improving it, correcting it. Criticism of society is ultimately revolution; there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and achieved. A critical attitude of this type is an operative factor of productivity; it is deeply enjoyable as such, and if we commonly use the term 'arts' for enterprises that improve people's lives, why should art proper remain aloof from arts of this sort?

[*'Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringt'*, BFA, 22/641-59, less notes 10, 15 and 16]

Probably written in spring 1940, first published in *Versuche* 11 (Berlin/Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1951). The excluded notes 10, 15 and 16 repeat passages from '*Verfremdung* Effects in Chinese Acting', and the short excerpt from 'Stage Design in the Epic Theatre' quoted in Note 3 is a fragment from late 1936 or early 1937, part of a larger project that was never completed and published. The essay is an additional attempt on Brecht's part to formulate fundamental theoretical issues of epic theatre in the late 1930s, including the essay 'On Experimental Theatre' and 'Street Scene'. It may well be that he completed this essay in early 1940 in the context of Helene Weigel's theatre training seminars in Stockholm or slightly later after leaving Sweden for Finland in April 1940. The list of plays in Note 1 includes two that are not by Brecht and evidently includes those productions that seemed important to him at the time; it also omits several of his own, evidence of his ruthless and ever-changing judgement of his own work. The 'Practice Scenes for Actors' referred to at the end of

Note 14 are new scenes Brecht devised for actors to prepare for *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and so on, showing the characters in a slightly different light (see *Brecht on Performance*).

### **Athletic Training**

Training in the athletic arts (dancing, fencing and also wrestling) is certainly important for actors, since they need to gain control of their body. However it is even more important for them to learn how to communicate the *gestus* to the entire body, and for this purpose training of the senses is needed. Training the body as an instrument is not hazard-free; it cannot be just the object of art, it has to be its subject as well. Good exercises: mixing a drink, building a fire in a fireplace, eating, playing with a child and so on.

[*Die athletische Ausbildung*, BFA, 22/615-6]

Typescript, probably written in early 1940, also in the context of Weigel's Stockholm theatre seminars (see previous note).

## On Epic Dramatic Art

### *Change*

*Actor:* You said the actor has to show how things change. What does that mean?

*Spectator:* That means that your spectator is also a historian.

*Actor:* So you are talking about historical plays?

*Spectator:* I know you call plays that take place in the past historical plays. But you seldom perform them for spectators who are historians.

*Actor:* Could you tell me what you mean by historians? You can't actually mean scholars or people who collect curiosities, because in the theatre a historian has to be something else.

*Spectator:* A historian is interested in how things change.

*Actor:* And how do you act with him in mind?

*Spectator:* By showing what was different then from today and suggesting a reason. But you also have to show how yesterday became today. So if you are charged with portraying sixteenth-century kings, you have to show that such conduct and such persons hardly exist today, or if they do, we are amazed.

*Actor:* So we should not always show that what is human remains constant?

*Spectator:* What is human shows itself by how it changes. If what is quintessentially human is detached from its ever-changing expressions, then an indifference develops to the form in which we humans live, and with it an acceptance of what is happening right now.

*Actor:* Give an example.

*Spectator:* In the first scene of *King Lear* the old king distributes his realm among his three daughters. I have seen performances in which he hacked his crown into three pieces with strokes of his sword. I didn't like that. I would have liked it better if he had torn a map into three pieces and handed them over to his daughters. Then we would have seen the effect on the country of that kind of rule. The process would have appeared stranger. Many would think that there is a difference if someone distributes household goods or realms among his heirs. A strange time from the past would have been called up and present time would have been depicted beneath this extinct form. In the same play a loyal servant of the deposed king beats up a disloyal one. Thus, in the poet's opinion, he proves his loyalty. But the actor playing the servant who was beaten could have played the pain seriously rather than jokingly. If he had dragged himself off with a broken spine, the scene would have seemed strange to the spectators, and that is what it should do.

*Actor:* What about plays that take place now?

*Spectator:* That is the main thing: these contemporary plays in particular should be performed historically.

*Actor:* So what should happen if we are showing a petty-bourgeois family of this decade?

*Spectator:* This family as a whole has a way of behaving that would not have been the same in earlier times, and we can imagine a time when again it will not be the same. What is special, what is typical for our time, must be shown; things that have changed in comparison to earlier times, and customs that right now are still resisting certain changes, or that are already changing. The individual on the other hand also has a history that is subject to change. What happens to him may be of historical importance. Or only what is of historical importance should be shown.

*Actor:* Don't humans themselves become much too unimportant that way?

*Spectator:* On the contrary. It is an honour for them if all the changes that are visible in them and through them are noted. They are taken as seriously as the Napoleons of earlier times. If we see the scene 'Such and such a worker is condemned by his boss to die of hunger', this should be no less important than a scene 'Napoleon is defeated at Waterloo'. The gestures of the people gathered together for this scene should be just as memorable, the backdrop just as carefully chosen.

*Actor:* So I should construct a character in such a way that I continuously show: this is how this person was at this time in his life and this is how he was at another time and: that was what he said or: this is how he usually talked at that time. And that should be linked to statements such as: this is how people of his class used to speak or to act, or: the person who I am portraying distinguished himself from people of his class with this action or that way of talking.

*Spectator:* That's right. When you read through your roles, first look for headings that are historical in that way. But don't forget that history is a history of class struggles so that the headings have to have social importance.

*Actor:* So the spectator is a social historian?

*Spectator:* Yes.

[*'Über die epische Schauspielkunst'*, BFA 22: 670-2]

Typescript, probably written in 1940, never published during Brecht's lifetime. The fictive dialogue probably arose in the context of the first working phase on *Messingkauf/Buying Brass* in 1939–41.



## On the Gradual Approach to the Study and Construction of the Figure

The actor must employ imagination sparingly. He constructs the figure by proceeding sentence by sentence, collecting affirmations and contradictions, assuring himself, so to speak, by means of the lines that the figure speaks and hears. He thoroughly commits this *step-by-step* process to memory, so that by the end of his study he will be able to present the figure to spectators in its step-by-step development. This step-by-step process must be maintained, not only due to the changes that the figure undergoes in the course of the plot, but also for the sake of revealing in the spectator's presence the obvious construction of the figure, so that the possibly minor, but nonetheless important surprises that the figure makes possible for the spectator can be ensured and thus support the spectator in his attitude of discovery and relearning. In order to make this possible for the spectator, the actor must thoroughly commit to memory the surprises that he experienced in his own attitude of discovery and relearning during the study of the figure. Such a gradual approach is superior to a deductive, inferential one proceeding from a total conception of the type to be portrayed that is at best hastily derived from a superficial perusal of the role. This approach gathers evidence and opportunities for the development of the type in retrospect by condensing the existing 'material', so to speak. Much of the 'material' remains unused, and most of it is distorted and thereby weakened. Above all, this way of becoming acquainted with a person is not to be recommended. An actor who proceeds in this manner obscures from the spectator the process by which he himself gained knowledge of the figure. Instead of transforming before the spectator's eyes, the actor appears already transformed, as a fact that is free of influences and therefore also apparently unable to be influenced – an entirely general, absolute and abstract person. The actor makes it possible for us to judge but not to change the type. But such judgements are useless, and the actor should not make them possible. This method usually produces experiences, not judgements. Instead of precise details and useable overviews, actors who take this approach only present the blurry and 'larger-than-life' memory, the so-called myth. They present a bad copy, not the original; they present a memory, instead of becoming one. Usually neither the actor nor the 'material' has the means to fill out such a larger-than-life, visionary image, and the impression of grandiose intentions gives rise to the impression of hammy acting. Nevertheless, most actors naturally tend towards this deductive method, mainly because it allows them, even in the first rehearsal, to play the type that they imagine for themselves and wish to play more than anything else, more than the specific concrete figure: an actor, that is, the 'actor' as type. Used

in this way, imagination plays a damaging role. In the inductive, step-by-step method, however, it is indispensable. This is because, in moving sentence by sentence, the learner's imagination continuously produces in the mind's eye figures that are ever more defined and concrete, indeed almost complete and capable of saying this or that line in this or that situation. In his study of the subsequent lines and situations, the actor must employ quick and therefore most likely rushed, imaginative constructions (solutions) with a seriousness and impartiality that can produce corrections of these constructions. The deductive actor does poorly if he defines his figure's basic type too early; to the same degree the actor proceeding inductively does well if he defines 'traits'. All of his studies should, with the help of imagination and factual evaluations, aim at investigating and representing a complete figure that is both specific and developing.

[*'Über das schrittweise Vorgehen beim Studium und Aufbau der Figur'*, BFA  
22/684-5]

Typescript, probably written in early 1941. Although Brecht wrote several fragmentary texts in 1936–7 about the actor constructing the role in the context of his reflections on non-Aristotelian drama (see 'On Determining the Zero Point', 'The Zero Point' and 'Notes on *Pointed Heads and Round Heads*'), the issue drew his attention once again in early 1941. This is one of a series of fragments about the step-by-step inductive method of constructing a role from this time period.

## Realism and the Proletariat

### The Popular and the Realistic

When considering what watchwords to establish for German literature today, we must remember that anything with a claim to be considered as literature is printed exclusively abroad, and with few exceptions can only be read there. This gives a peculiar twist to the watchword of popularity [*Volkstümlichkeit*] in literature. The writer is supposed to write for people [*Volk*] without living among them. When we come to look more closely, however, the gap between the writer and the people has not grown as wide as might be thought. It is not as wide now as it might appear, and it was not as narrow as it appeared earlier. The dominant aesthetics, book prizes and the police always put a considerable distance

between the writer and the people. All the same, it would be wrong, that is, unrealistic, to see this increased distance as purely 'external'. Certainly a special effort is needed today in order to write in a popular way. But at the same time it has become easier: easier and more urgent. The people have separated more clearly from the elite; their oppressors and exploiters have parted company with them and become involved in a bloody war against them that can no longer be overlooked. It has become easier to take sides. Open warfare has, as it were, broken out among the 'audience'.

Nor can the demand for a realist way of writing be so easily overlooked any longer. It has become more or less self-evident. The ruling strata are using lies more openly than before, and the lies are bigger. Telling the truth seems increasingly urgent. The suffering is greater, and the number of sufferers has grown. Compared with the vast suffering of the masses, it seems trivial and even despicable to worry about petty difficulties and the difficulties of petty groups.

There is only one ally against the increasing barbarism: the people on whom it imposes this suffering. Only the people offer any prospects. Thus it is natural to turn to them, and more necessary than ever to speak their language.

The words *popularity* and *realism* are therefore natural companions. It is in the interest of the people, the broad working masses, that literature should give them truthful representations of life, and truthful representations of life are in fact only of use to the broad working masses, the people so that they have to be suggestive and intelligible to them, that is, popular. None the less these concepts need a thorough cleansing before being thrown into sentences where they will get smelted and put to use. It would be a mistake to treat them as fully explained, ahistorical, unambiguous ('We all know what's meant by that, no need for hair-splitting.') The German word for 'popular', *volkstümlich*, is itself none too popular. It is unrealistic to imagine that it is. A whole series of words ending in *tum* need handling with care. Just think of *Brauchtum* [custom], *Königtum* [royalty], *Heiligtum* [shrine], and it is well known that *Volkstum* too has a quite specific ceremonious, sacramental and dubious ring that we cannot by any means overlook. We cannot overlook it, because we definitely need the conception of popularity or *Volkstümlichkeit*.

It is part of that supposedly poetic way of wording by which the 'Volk' – more folk than people – is presented as particularly superstitious, or rather as an object of superstition. In this the folk appears with its immutable characteristics, its time-honoured traditions, forms of art, customs and habits, its religiosity, its hereditary enemies, its unconquerable strength and all the rest. A peculiar unity is conjured up of tormentor and tormented, exploiter and exploited, liar and victim; nor is it by any means a simple matter of the many, 'little' working

people as against those on top.

The history of all the falsifications that have operated with this conception of *Volkstum* is a long and complex story that is part of the history of the class struggle. We shall not embark on it but shall simply keep in mind the fact of such forgery whenever we speak of our need for popular art, meaning art for the broad masses of the people, for the many oppressed by the few, 'the people proper', the mass of producers that has so long been the object of politics and now has to become its subject. We shall remind ourselves that powerful institutions have long prevented this *Volk* from developing fully, that it has been artificially or forcibly tied down by conventions, and that the conception *volkstümlich* has been stamped as a static one, without background or development. We shall have no dealings with this version of the concept, or rather we shall have to fight it.

Our conception of *popular* refers to the people who are not only fully involved in the process of development but are actually taking it over, forcing it, deciding it. We have in mind a people that is making history and altering the world and itself. We have in mind a fighting people and also a fighting conception of *popularity*.

*Popular* means: intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them/adopting, consolidating and correcting their standpoint/representing the most progressive segment of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership: thus intelligible to other sections too/linking with tradition and carrying it further/handing on the achievements of the section now leading to the section of the people that is striving to lead.

We now come to the concept of *realism*. It is an old concept that has been much used by many and for many purposes, and before it can be applied we must cleanse it too. This is necessary because when the people take over their legacy, there has to be a process of expropriation. Literary works cannot be taken over like factories, or literary forms of expression like industrial methods. Realist writing, of which history offers many widely varying examples, is likewise conditioned by the question of how, when and for what class it is used, conditioned down to the last small detail. As we have in mind a fighting people that is changing the real world, we must not cling to 'well-tried' rules for telling a story, worthy models set up by literary history, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not abstract the *one and only* realism from certain given works, but shall make use of all means, old and new, tried and untried, deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put reality in the hands of people in such a way that it can be mastered. We shall take care not to ascribe realism to a particular historical form of novel belonging to a particular period, Balzac's or Tolstoy's,

for instance, so as to set up purely formal and literary criteria of realism. We shall not restrict ourselves to speaking of realism in cases where you can, for example, smell, taste, feel 'everything', where there is 'atmosphere' and plots are developed that foreground the psychological exposition of the characters. Our conception of *realism* needs to be broad and political, independent of conventions.

*Realistic*<sup>7</sup> means: revealing the causal complex of society/unmasking the ruling viewpoints as the viewpoints of the rulers/writing from the standpoint of the class that has in readiness the broadest solutions for the most urgent difficulties besetting human society/emphasizing the factor of development/concretely and making it possible to abstract.

It is a tall order, and it can be made taller. And we shall let the artists apply all their imagination, originality, sense of humour and power of invention to its fulfilment. We will not stick to unduly detailed literary models or force the artists to follow overly precise rules for telling a story.

We shall establish that so-called sensuous writing (in which everything can be smelt, tasted, felt) is not to be identified automatically with realist writing, for we shall see that there are sensuously written works that are not realist, and realist works that are not sensuously written. We shall have to go carefully into the question of whether the plot is best developed by aiming at psychological exposition of the characters as the final effect. Our readers may quite well feel that they have not been given the key to what is happening if they are simply seduced by a combination of arts to take part in the inner emotions of our books' heroes. By taking over the forms of Balzac and Tolstoy without a thorough inspection, we might perhaps exhaust our readers, the people, just as these writers often do. Realism is not a pure question of form. Copying the methods of these realists, we should cease to be realists ourselves.

For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a poor outlook for those who do not sit at the golden tables. Methods wear out, allures give out. New problems loom and demand new techniques. Reality changes; to represent it, the means of representation must change too. Nothing arises from nothing; the new springs from the old, but that is just what makes it new.

The oppressors do not always appear in the same mask. The masks cannot always be stripped off in the same way. There are so many tricks for dodging the mirror that is held out. Their military roads are termed Autobahn. Their tanks are painted to look like Macduff's bushes. Their agents can show calloused hands, as if they were workers. Yes: it takes ingenuity to change the hunter into the quarry. What was popular yesterday is no longer so today, for the people of yesterday were not the people they are today.

Anybody who is not bound by formal prejudices knows that there are many ways of suppressing truth and many ways of stating it: that indignation at inhuman conditions can be stimulated in many ways, by direct description of a pathos-laden or matter-of-fact kind, by narrating stories and parables, by jokes, by over-and understatement. In the theatre reality can be represented in a factual or a fantastic form. The actors can do without (or with the minimum of) make-up, appearing 'natural', and the whole thing can be a fake; they can wear grotesque masks and represent the truth. There is not much to argue about here: the means must be asked what the end is. The people know how to ask this. Piscator's great experiments in the theatre (and my own), which repeatedly involved shattering conventional forms, found their chief support in the most progressive cadres of the working class. The workers judged everything by the amount of truth contained in it; they welcomed any innovation that helped the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society; they rejected whatever seemed like playing, like machinery working for its own sake, that is, no longer or not yet fulfilling a purpose. The workers' arguments were never literary or purely theatrical. You can't mix theatre and film: that sort of thing was never said. If the film was not properly used, the most we heard was: that bit of film is unnecessary, it's distracting. Workers' choruses spoke intricate rhythmical verse parts ('If it rhymed, it'd all slip down like butter, and nothing would stick') and sang difficult (unaccustomed) compositions by Eisler ('It's got some guts in it'). But we had to alter particular lines whose sense was wrong or hard to arrive at. When there were certain subtleties (irregularities, complexities) in marching songs that had rhymes to make them easier to learn and simple rhythms to 'put them across' better, then they said: 'That's amusing, there was a sort of twist in that'. They had no use for anything played out, trivial, so ordinary that you don't need to think ('There's nothing in it'). If an aesthetic was needed, here it was. I shall never forget how one worker looked at me when I responded to his request to include something extra in a song about the USSR ('It *must* go in – what's the point otherwise?') by saying that it would wreck the artistic form: he put his head on one side and smiled. At this polite smile a whole section of aesthetics collapsed. The workers were not afraid to teach us, nor were they afraid to learn.

I speak from experience when I say that you need never be frightened of putting bold and unaccustomed things before the proletariat, so long as they have to do with reality. There will always be educated persons, connoisseurs of the arts, who will step in with a 'The people won't understand that'. But the people impatiently shove them aside and come to terms directly with the artist. There is highly cultured stuff made for cliques, designed to form cliques: the two-thousandth transformation of some old felt hat, the spicing-up of a venerable and

now decomposing piece of meat. The proletariat rejects it ('They've got things to worry about') with an incredulous, somewhat indulgent shake of the head. It is not the spice that is being rejected, but the rotten meat; not the two-thousandth form, but the old felt. When they themselves took to writing and acting, they were compellingly original. What was known as 'agitprop' art, at which a number of second-rate noses were turned up, was a mine of novel artistic techniques and ways of expression. Magnificent and long-forgotten elements from periods of truly popular art cropped up there, boldly adapted to the new social ends. Daring cuts and condensations, beautiful simplifications: in all this there was often an astonishing economy and elegance and a fearless eye for complexity. A lot of it may have been primitive, but it was never primitive with the kind of primitiveness that afflicted the supposedly differentiated psychological portrayals of bourgeois art. It is very wrong to make a few misconceived stylizations a pretext for rejecting a style of representation that attempts (so often successfully) to bring out the essential and to encourage abstraction. The sharp eyes of the workers saw through Naturalism's superficial representation of reality. When they said about the psychological analysis in [Gerhart Hauptmann's] *Fuhrmann Henschel*, 'that's more than we want to know', they were in fact wishing they could get a more exact representation of the real social forces operating under the immediately visible surface. To quote from my own experience: they were not put off by the fantastic costumes and the apparently unreal setting of *The Threepenny Opera*. They were not narrow; they hated narrowness (their living quarters were narrow). They were generous; their employers were stingy. They thought it possible to dispense with some things that the artists felt to be essential, but they were amiable enough about it; they were not against surplus: they were against anything superfluous. They did not muzzle the threshing ox, although they saw to it that he threshed. They did not believe in something like 'the' method. They knew that they needed many different methods in order to reach their objective.

So the criteria for the popular and the realistic need to be chosen not only with great care but also with an open mind. They must not be deduced from existing realist works and existing popular works, as is often the case. Such an approach would lead to purely formalistic criteria, and questions of popularity and realism would be decided by form.

One cannot decide if a work is realist or not by finding out whether it resembles existing, reputedly realist works that must be counted realist for their time. In each individual case the picture given of life must be compared, not with another picture, but with the actual life portrayed. And likewise where popularity is concerned, there is a wholly formalistic procedure against which we must

guard. The intelligibility of a work of literature is not ensured exclusively by its being written in exactly the same way as other works that people have understood. These other works too were not invariably written just like the works before them. Something was done for their intelligibility. In the same way we must do something for the intelligibility of new works. Besides *being popular* there is such a thing as *becoming popular*.

If we want a truly popular literature, alive and fighting, completely gripped by reality and completely gripping reality, then we must keep pace with reality's headlong development. The great working masses of the people are on the move. The activity and brutality of their enemies proves it.

[‘*Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus*’, BFA 22/405-13]

Typescript, written in June 1938, for the exile journal *Das Wort*, which Brecht co-edited (see the note to ‘On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms’). During 1937, it featured a debate on Realism and Expressionism that had been raging among the German émigrés ever since Georg Lukács first raised the subject in January 1934 in *Internationale Literatur (Deutsche Blätter)*, the largely similar Moscow review edited by Johannes R. Becher and to which Brecht also contributed. Brecht’s response was to write two articles, neither of which in fact appeared in *Das Wort*: this one and another from July 1938 called ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing’ (see *Brecht on Art and Politics*, Section 4, including the section introduction with details on the so-called Expressionism Debate). The context of the entire discussion was the new doctrine of Socialist Realism introduced at the Soviet Writers’ Congress of 1934. To what extent Brecht himself had the new doctrine in mind is not clear; he never explicitly said a word against it either then or later, although the Soviet artists whose work he admired and the concept of *Verfremdung* itself were all condemned in Russia as ‘formalistic’ – a word that Brecht himself uses in almost the opposite sense. Worse still, Sergei Tretiakov, who had written about Brecht and been adapted by him, disappeared in the Soviet purges around this time, and soon Vladimir Meyerhold’s arrest and death were to follow.

## **Two Essay Fragments on Non-professional Acting**

### *1) One or two points about proletarian actors*

The first thing that strikes us about a proletarian actor is the simplicity of the



acting. What I mean by a proletarian actor is neither an actor of the bourgeois theatre who has proletarian origins nor a bourgeois actor performing for the proletariat, but a proletarian who has not gone through a bourgeois acting school and does not belong to a professional association. What I call simplicity of acting seems to me to be the alpha and omega of proletarian dramatic art.

Let me at once admit that I do not by any means find 'simple acting' *ipso facto* good or prefer it to anything less simple. I am not automatically moved by the enthusiasm of untrained or inadequately trained people who none the less feel passionately about 'art', nor have I any use for the snobbery that makes some people with jaded palates prefer 'plain black bread' to any delicacy.

The actors of small, working-class theatres to be found in all major cities of Europe, Asia and America that have not been struck down by fascism are by no means dilettantes, and their acting is not 'black bread'. It is simple, but only in one specific respect.

The small theatres of the workers are always impoverished; they cannot afford to spend much on sets. By day the actors are working. Those who are out of work have almost as much to do every day as the rest, because hunting for a job is a job in itself. Certainly they are no less exhausted in the evening when they arrive at rehearsal. The way these people act does to some extent betray their lack of surplus energy. A certain absence of assurance at the same time takes the shine off their acting. Grand, individual emotions, the display of the differentiated psychology of individual persons, the 'rich inner life' in general: such things are not shown by working-class theatres. To that extent the acting is simple, that is, impoverished.

And yet there is another kind of simplicity to be found in their acting, a kind that does not result from a lack of origins but from a specific outlook and a specific concern. We speak of simplicity when complicated problems are mastered in a way that makes them easier to deal with and less difficult to grasp. A great number of seemingly self-contradictory facts, a vast and discouraging tangle, is often set in order by science in such a way that a relatively simple truth emerges. This kind of simplicity does not involve poverty. Yet this is what we find in the playing of the best proletarian actors, whenever it is a question of portraying people's social life together.

Surprisingly often small, working-class theatres foster the great simple truths about the complex and baffling relationships among the people of our time. Where wars come from, and who fights them and who pays for them; what kind of destruction results from people's oppressiveness towards other people; where the efforts of the many are directed, whence the easy life of the few comes; whose knowledge serves whom; who is hurt by whose actions: all this is shown

by the small, impoverished theatres of the workers. I am not speaking just of the plays but of those who perform them best and with the liveliest concern.

A little more money, and the room shown on the stage would be a room; a little speech training, and the actors' speech would be that of 'educated people'; a little public acclaim, and the performance would gain in forcefulness; more money for eating and leisure, and the actors would cease to be tired. Cannot these things be provided? It is much less easy to provide what is missing in wealthy bourgeois theatres. How can war possibly be war on their stages? How can they show where the efforts of the many are directed and whence the easy life of the few comes? How can they find out the great simple truths about people's life together and put them across? Once it can overcome poverty, the small, working-class theatre stands some chance of overcoming the simplicity that is the hallmark poverty gives to its performances; but the wealthy bourgeois theatre stands no chance of achieving the simplicity that comes from searching after truth.

So what about the grand, individual emotions, the differentiated psychology of the individual person, the rich inner life? Yes, what about this rich inner life that for many intellectuals is merely a poor substitute for a rich outer life? The answer is that art can have nothing to do with it so long as it remains a substitute. The grand, individual emotions will appear in art simply as distorted, unnatural speech and overheated, constricted temperament; the differentiated psychology of the individual person will have an effect in art merely as the unhealthy and exaggerated exception, so long as individuality remains the privilege of a minority that owns not only 'personality' but other, more material things.

True art becomes impoverished with the masses and grows rich with the masses.

## **2) *Is it worth speaking about the amateur theatre?***

Anybody who seriously sets out to study the art of the theatre and its social function will do well to pay some attention to the many forms of theatrical activity that can be found outside the great institutions: that is, the undeveloped, shapeless, spontaneous efforts of the amateurs. Even if the amateurs were only what the professionals take them to be – *members of the audience getting up on stage* – they would still be interesting enough. Sweden is among the countries particularly well off for amateur theatres. The vast distances in this country, which is virtually a continent on its own, make it difficult to provide visits by professional companies from the capital. People in the provinces accordingly make their own theatre.

There are nearly a thousand active theatrical groups in the Swedish amateur theatre movement, and they put on at least two thousand shows a year to an audience of at least half a million. A movement like this is of great cultural importance in a country of six million inhabitants.

It is often said that amateur theatrical performances are on a low artistic and intellectual level. We won't go into that here. Others maintain on the contrary that some performances at least give evidence of considerable natural talent and some groups show a great ambition to perfect themselves. It has, however, become so usual to look down on the amateur theatre that we wonder how it would be if its level were really so bad. Would it no longer count? The answer is plainly no.

For it is wrong to believe that there is no point in discussing amateur efforts in the arts if 'nothing of benefit' to the arts results. A bad stage performance is not just one that, by contrast with a good one, makes no impression. The impression made may not be good, but an impression is made none the less: a bad one. In the arts, if nowhere else, the principle that 'if it doesn't do much good, at least it can't do any harm' is quite mistaken. Good art stimulates sensitivity to art. Bad art damages it; it doesn't leave it untouched.

Most people have no clear idea of art's consequences, whether for good or for bad. They suppose that a spectator who is not inwardly gripped by art, because it is not good enough, is not affected at all. Quite apart from the fact that you can be 'gripped' by bad art as easily as by good, even if you are *not* gripped, something happens to you.

Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world. Good or bad, the actors show how people behave under given circumstances. A jealous man behaves in such-and-such a way, we learn, or this and that action are the result of jealousy. A rich man is subject to these particular passions, an old man experiences these particular feelings, a country woman acts in this particular way and so on. Furthermore the spectator is encouraged to draw certain conclusions about how the world works. If you behave in such-and-such a way, for example, you must reckon with this and that result. The spectator is brought to share certain feelings of the persons appearing on the stage and thereby to approve them as universally human feelings, only natural, to be taken for granted. Since films resemble plays in this respect but are more widely known, perhaps a film can serve to illustrate what is meant.

In the film *Gunga Din*, based on a short story by Kipling, I saw British occupation forces fighting a native population. A tribe – the term itself implies something wild and uncivilized, as opposed to the word 'people' – attacked a body of British troops stationed in India. The Indians were primitive creatures,

either comic or wicked: comic when loyal to the British and wicked when hostile. The British soldiers were honest, good-humoured chaps and when they used their fists on the mob and 'knocked some sense' into them, the audience laughed. One of the Indians betrayed his compatriots to the British, sacrificed his life so that his fellow countrymen should be defeated and earned the audience's heartfelt applause.

My heart was touched too: I felt like applauding, and laughed in all the right places, despite the fact that I knew all the time that there was something wrong, that the Indians are not primitive and uncultured people but have a magnificent age-old culture, and that this Gunga Din could also be seen in a very different light, for example, as a traitor to his people. I was amused and touched because this utterly distorted account was an artistic success and considerable resources in talent and ingenuity had been applied in making it.

Obviously artistic appreciation of this sort is not without effects. It weakens the good instincts and strengthens the bad, it contradicts true experience and spreads misconceptions, in short, it falsifies our picture of the world.

There is no play and no theatrical performance that does not in some way or other affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences, and indeed that says something for it.

A good deal of attention has been paid to the theatre's – even the supposedly unpolitical theatre's – political influence: its effect on the formation of political judgements, on political moods and emotions. Neither the socialist thinker nor the parson in his pulpit would deny that our morals are affected by it. It matters how love, marriage, work and death are treated on the stage, what kind of ideals are set up and propagated for lovers, for people struggling for their existence and so on. In this exceedingly serious sphere the stage is virtually functioning as a fashion show, parading not the latest dresses but the latest ways of behaving: not what you wear but how you conduct yourself.

Perhaps the most illuminating, although not the most vital point, is the theatre's influence on the formation of taste. How do you express yourself beautifully? What is the best way to arrange yourself in a group? What is beauty anyway? What constitutes light-hearted behaviour? What is laudable deception? In countless detailed ways the stage affects the taste of the audience gazing up at it, for better or for worse. For taste plays a decisive part even in realistic art, nowhere more so. Even the representation of ugliness needs to be guided by it. The arrangements on the stage, the passage of the characters across it, the scale of colours, the control of sound and of vocal cadences: all this is a question of taste.

So political, moral and aesthetic influences all radiate from the theatre: good

when it is good, bad when it is bad.

We easily forget that human education proceeds along highly theatrical lines. In a quite theatrical manner the child is taught how to behave; logical arguments only come later. When such-and-such occurs, it is told (or seen), you must laugh. It joins in when there is laughter, without knowing why; if asked why it is laughing, it is wholly confused. In the same way it joins in shedding tears, not only weeping because the grown-ups do so but also feeling genuine sorrow. This can be seen at funerals, whose meaning escapes children entirely. These are theatrical events that form the character. The human being copies gestures, miming, tones of voice. And weeping arises from sorrow, but sorrow also arises from weeping.

It is no different with grown-ups. Their education never finishes. Only the dead are beyond being altered by their fellow human beings. Think this over, and you will realize how important the theatre is for the formation of character. You will see what it means that thousands should act before hundreds of thousands. You cannot just shrug off so many people's concern with art.

And art itself is not unaffected by the way in which it is practised on the most casual, carefree, naive level. The theatre is, so to speak, the most human and universal art of all, the one most commonly practised, that is, practised not just on the stage but also in everyday life. The theatre of a given people or a given time must be judged as a whole, as a living organism that isn't healthy unless it is healthy in every limb. That is another reason why it is worth speaking about the amateur theatre.

[*'Einiges über proletarische Schauspieler'*, BFA 22/594-7, and *'Lohnt es sich, vom Amateurtheater zu reden?'*, BFA 22/590-3]

Typescripts, both written in July/August 1939. In May 1939, Brecht participated in a meeting with social-democratic members from the Swedish Federation of Amateur Theatres; later he presented his lecture 'On Experimental Theatre' (see above) to members of the federation; and in June 1939, Ruth Berlau began rehearsing Brecht's one-act play *How Much Is Your Iron?* with an amateur theatre group under his supervision (opening in the second half of August 1939 in Tollare, near Stockholm). Both essays were planned as part of a larger project under the title 'Six Chronicles about Amateur Theatre' that was never completed. During his exile, Brecht was virtually cut off from the professional theatre, his work being performed only by amateurs. Even before 1933, he had written the *Lehrstück* texts primarily for non-professional performers, his first acquaintance with

‘proletarian actors’ and singers being evidently due to productions of *The Decision* and *The Mother*. In exile he came into contact notably with the German semi-amateur groups in Paris who gave the premieres of *Señora Carrar’s Rifles* and *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1937 and 1938 respectively), with the New York Theater Union, Unity Theatre in London, the Copenhagen Revolutionary Theatre under Dagmar Andreassen and other Scandinavian amateur companies. Throughout the Hitler period, moreover, his songs and sketches featured in the programmes of German exiled groups in many countries. The film reference in the second essay is to George Steven’s 1939 *Gunga Din*.

### **The Attitude of the Rehearsal Director (in the Inductive Process)**

The rehearsal director does not enter the theatre here with an ‘idea’, a ‘vision’, a ‘blocking plan’ and a ‘finished set design’. He does not wish to ‘realize’ an idea. His task is to stimulate and organize the productivity of the actors (musicians, painters and so on). He does not understand *rehearsing* as the repeated drilling of something that is set in his head from the outset. Instead he understands it as *trying something out*. He must insist that each of the several alternatives be considered. It is dangerous for him to allow himself to be rushed and offer the ‘only correct’ solution right away. The correct solution can only be one among the many possible, if there is a correct one to be had, and it is worthwhile to try out other possible solutions because this will enrich the final solution. The solution draws its power from the process of elimination. Moreover, the productivity of the individual collaborators is not uniform, they produce at different speeds and need different incentives. The collaborators also possess their own diverse interests, which need to be fully developed in order to enhance the overall solution. An important task of the rehearsal director is to expose all the schematic, customary and conventional solutions to these challenges. He must unleash *crises*. Of course, he should not shy away from admitting that he does not always know ‘the’ solution or have one at hand. The trust that the collaborators have in him must be grounded in his ability to make clear what is *not* a solution. He must contribute questions, doubt and a multitude of possible standpoints, comparisons, memories and experiences. He will generally find it challenging to prevent an overly hasty construction of situations and roles, because this presents the more seasoned and strong-willed (and more famous) actors the opportunity of paralysing the other actors’ productivity and pushing their own conventional solutions on the others. During the collective reading of the play with parts cast he must organize an *attitude of amazement* in the actors.

He must bring them to ask: 'Why do I say this? And why does he say that?' He must even bring them to say: 'It would be better if I (or he) said this or that.' He must see to it that the initial hesitation and contradiction in pursuit of a certain answer do not disappear from the design in the course of the rehearsals. What is special about the statements or actions must be noticeable in the final design. The spectator must also have access to this hesitation and contradiction. The path from the reading table to the stage should not be traversed too quickly. Translating the scenes on to the stage piece by piece is better. 'Approximate and suggestive' details for the stage should be anticipated from the reading table. And this tentative, *approximate, suggestive* way should be maintained in the final design. The spectator should see the 'solution' as a particular one, still containing a certain randomness that in reality adheres to it. The best way to produce the through line is not through the rivetless welding of details, but rather as a logical chain of details, which still retains the quality of details. In this way the *logic* of their sequence and welding comes into its own. It is not enough that the individual statements, gestures and so on are confronted conversationally with other equally possible statements and gestures at the reading table. The other possibilities must also be pursued. The element of surprise requires that something be expected, but that something need not be everything that could be expected. And the element of surprise is a foundational element of the impact. The actors go straight for the *effect*; that is a healthy goal, they attempt to surprise. They produce only the 'theatrical' effect, the 'impermissible' effect, when they do not choose the logically expectable out of all possible things that could be expected. The healthy kind of surprise emerges when the logical solution is surprising. The layout of the auditorium should be fully disregarded while trying out the details on the stage. By doing this, you reach a second phase that is a matter of providing the spectator with the best insight to the events, a rearrangement that seeks to make things clearer. For every incident the rehearsal director should seek out a situation that could arrange a demonstration of a similar incident in everyday life. King Lear's first entrance with his division of the realm could be thought of as a demonstration before a commission of lawyers, doctors, masters of ceremony, family members, historians, politicians and so on. The details would have to satisfy the demands of the many interested parties.

[*'Haltung des Probenleiters (bei induktivem Vorgehen)'*, BFA 22/597-9]

Typescript, probably written in 1939, possibly for Ruth Berlau in her role as rehearsal director for a Swedish theatre group (see previous note).

## Notes on the Folk Play

The *Volksstück* or folk play is normally a crude and humble kind of theatre that academic critics pass over in silence or treat with condescension. In the second case they prefer it to be what it is, just as some regimes prefer their 'Volk' crude and humble. It is a mixture of earthy humour and sentimentality, homespun morality and cheap sex. The wicked get punished, and the good get married off; the industrious get left an inheritance, and the idle get left in the lurch. The technique of the people who write these plays is more or less international; it hardly ever varies. To act in them, all that is needed is a capacity for speaking unnaturally and plain old vanity on the stage. A good helping of the dilettante's superficial slickness is enough.

The big cities moved with the times, progressing from the folk play to the revue. Revue is to the folk play as a hit song is to a folksong, although the folk play lacked the folksong's nobility. More recently the revue has been taken up as a literary form. Wangenheim of Germany, Abell of Denmark, Blitzstein of the USA and Auden of England have written interesting plays in the form of revues, plays that are neither crude nor humble. Their plays have something of the poetry of the old folk play but absolutely nothing of its naivety. They avoid its conventional situations and schematized characters, although on closer inspection they are even more romantic. Their situations are grotesque and at bottom they hardly have characters, barely even parts for the actors. The linear plot has been thrown on the scrap heap, that is, the monotony along with the plot, for the new plays have no plot, hardly even a connecting thread. Their performance demands virtuosity – they cannot be played by amateurs – but it is the virtuosity of the cabaret.

It seems futile to hope to revive the old folk play. Not only is it utterly bogged down but, more important, it never really flourished. Against that, the literary revue has never managed to 'become popular'. It is too full of cheap titbits. None the less it has proved the existence of certain needs, even though it cannot satisfy them. It can in fact be assumed that there is a need for naive but not primitive, poetic but not romantic, realistic but not topically political theatre. What might a new folk play of this sort look like?

With regard to the story the literary revue gives some useful hints. As already mentioned, it does without any unified and continuous plot and presents 'numbers', that is to say, loosely linked sketches. This is a form that revives the 'pranks and adventures' of the old folk epics, although admittedly in a form difficult to recognize. The sketches are not bound by narration, and they have few epic elements, just as Low's caricatures have little that is epic by



comparison with Hogarth's. They are more spiritualistic, more concentrated on a single point. The new kind of folk play could learn from the relatively more independent episodes of the literary revue, but it needs to provide more epic substance and to be more realistic.

The literary revue also gives pointers where poetry is concerned. In particular those plays that Auden wrote with Isherwood contain sections of great poetic beauty. He uses choruses and very fine poems, and the episodes themselves are also sometimes elevated. It is all more or less symbolic, however; he even reintroduces allegory. If we compare him with Aristophanes – which Auden wouldn't mind – we see the markedly subjective character of this poetry and symbolism; the new folk play ought to learn from the poetry but provide greater objectivity. The poetry ought perhaps to be more in the actual situations instead of being expressed by the characters reacting to them.

It is most important to find a style of presentation that is both artistic and natural. Given the Babylonian confusion of styles prevailing on the European stage, this is extremely difficult. The contemporary stage at present has basically two styles to be reckoned with, although they are pretty well entangled with each other. The 'elevated' style of presentation that was worked out for great poetic masterpieces and can still be used, for example, for Ibsen's early plays, is still available, if in a slightly battered condition. The second style available – the naturalistic – supplemented rather than succeeded it; the two ways of acting went on existing side by side like sailboat and steamboat. The elevated style used to be reserved exclusively for unrealistic plays, while a realistic play got on more or less 'without style'. Stylized theatre and elevated theatre meant the same thing. But as Naturalism became feebler, it made all sorts of compromises, so that today even in realistic plays we find a peculiar mixture of the casual and the declamatory. Nothing can be done with a cocktail like this. All that has been provided by the elevated style is the unnaturalness and artificiality, the schematism and pompousness into whose depths this style tumbled before Naturalism took over. And all that survives here of the great period of Naturalism is the accidental, shapeless, unimaginative element that was part of Naturalism even at its best. Thus new paths must be found. In what direction? The fusion of the two styles of acting – romantic-classical and naturalistic – to form a romantic-naturalistic cocktail was a marriage of weakness. Two tottering rivals propped each other up for fear of falling over for good. The mixture took place almost unconsciously, by mutual concessions, silent relinquishing of principles, in short by corruption. But if this synthesis had been consciously and forcefully carried out, it really would have been the right solution. The contrast of art and nature can be made a fruitful one if the work of art makes a unity of it,

but without eliminating it. We saw art creating its own nature, its own world, a world of art, one that had and wished to have very little indeed to do with the real world; and we saw art just exhausting itself in the effort to copy the real world, and sacrificing its imagination almost completely in the process. We need an art that masters nature; we need an artistic representation of reality, and (also) a natural art.

A theatre's cultural standard is decided partly by its degree of success in overcoming the contrast between 'noble' (elevated, stylized) and realistic ('keyhole') acting. It is often supposed that realistic acting is 'by nature' slightly 'ignoble', and 'noble' acting correspondingly unrealistic. The idea here is that because fishwives are not noble, nothing noble can emerge from their life-like representation. There is some fear that even queens may appear not quite noble if realistically portrayed. This is a bundle of fallacies. The fact is that when actors have to represent crudity, meanness and ugliness, whether the subject be a fishwife or a queen, they simply cannot get along without delicacy, a sense of fairness and a feeling for the beautiful. A truly cultured theatre never has to buy its realism at the cost of sacrificing artistic beauty. Reality may lack beauty, but that by no means disqualifies it for a stylized stage. Just its lack of beauty may be the chief subject of the representation – in a comedy such base human characteristics as avarice, swank, stupidity, ignorance, disputatiousness; in a serious play the dehumanized social setting. Whitewashing is in itself something unquestionably ignoble, love of truth unquestionably noble. Art is in a position to represent the ugliness of what is ugly in a beautiful manner, the baseness of what is base in a noble manner, for the artist can also show ungraciousness graciously and meekness with power. There is no reason why the subject matter of a comedy portraying 'the common life' should not be ennobled. The theatre has at its command delicate colours, agreeable and significant groupings, original gestures – in short, *style*; it has humour, imagination and wisdom with which to overcome ugliness. These things have to be said because our theatres are not naturally disposed to waste anything so superior as style on plays whose form and content is that of a folk play. They might perhaps respond to the demand for a cleaner style if they were dealing with a type of play whose outward appearance was already quite distinct from the naturalistic problem play: the verse play, for instance. They might admit without prompting that the verse play's attitude to the 'problem' and its treatment of the psychological aspects were different. It is harder for a play in prose, and popular prose at that, which has neither much of a 'problem' nor any great psychological complications. The whole genre of folk plays is not recognized as a literary category. The ballad and the Elizabethan 'history' are literary genres, but both

the Moritat from which the former and the beergarden horror show from which the latter evolved need to be performed with 'style', whether you agree to accept them as literary or not. It is admittedly harder to recognize selectivity when the selection has been made from a new range of material that has so far been regarded with the merest indifference. [A number of details from Brecht's play *Puntila and His Man Matti* are then summarized.]

It may seem unsuitable that a single small folk play should occasion such far-reaching commentary, conjure up such vast phantoms and finally demand an entirely new art of theatrical representation. Yet, like it or not, this demand has got to be made; our whole repertoire calls for a new kind of art that is quite indispensable for the performance of the great masterpieces of the past and has to be developed if new masterpieces are to arise. All that the foregoing is intended to do is to remind people that the demand for a new realistic art applies to the new folk play too. The folk play is a type of work that has long been treated with contempt and left to amateurs and hacks. It is time it was inflected with the high ideals to which its very name commits it.

[‘*Anmerkungen zum Volksstück*’, BFA 24/293-9, omitting detailed references to *Puntila and His Man Matti* in the last paragraph but one]

Written after Brecht completed his folk or lowbrow play, *Puntila and His Man Matti*, in collaboration with the Finnish writer Hella Wuolijoki in September 1940, first published in *Versuche* 10 (Berlin/West: Suhrkamp, 1950). Gustav von Wangenheim ran a left-wing company called ‘Truppe 1931’; his biggest success was *Die Mausefalle* (The Mousetrap) in 1931. Kjeld Abell, originally a stage designer, wrote the musical revue *The Lost Melody*, which was produced in 1935 at the Riddersalen Theatre in Copenhagen. Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle will Rock* (dedicated to Brecht, whom he met in New York City in 1935) was staged by Orson Welles at the New York Mercury Theatre in 1937. Wystan Hugh Auden wrote *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *The Ascent of F6* and *On the Frontier* with Christopher Isherwood in 1935 and 1936; they were produced by Rupert Doone with the (London) Group Theatre. David Low was the cartoonist for the London Evening Standard; Brecht owned a copy of Low’s *A Cartoon History of Our Times* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1939). In the summer of 1941, Brecht left Finland shortly before the entry of the German troops, crossed the USSR and the Pacific Ocean and settled in Santa Monica outside Los Angeles.

- <sup>1</sup> Piscator too used music, in particular in *Der Kaufmann von Berlin* (*The Merchant of Berlin*, Eisler), in *Konjunktur* (*Economic Boom*, Weill), *Hoppla, wir leben* (*Hoppla, We're Alive*, Meisel).
- <sup>2</sup> The important theatres were naturally prominently involved with the experiments along this line. Chekhov had his Stanislavsky, Ibsen his Brahm *etc.* However, the initiative along the line of increasing the instructional value proceeded mostly clearly from the drama itself.
- <sup>3</sup> We need not enter here into a thorough critique of the technocratic point of view of the great thinker. Of course that which is useful for the community is produced by the masses, and the few inventive minds are rather helpless when faced with the economic circulation of commodities. For us it is enough that Einstein confirms the lack of knowledge about social interests, directly and indirectly.
- <sup>4</sup> We often come across demonstrations of an everyday sort that are more thorough imitations than our street-corner accident demands. Generally they are comic ones. Our next door neighbour may decide to do a 'take-off' on the rapacious behaviour of our common landlord. Such an imitation is often rich and full of variety. Closer examination will show, however, that even so apparently complex an imitation zeroes in on one specific side of the landlord's behaviour. The imitation is summary or selective, deliberately leaving out those occasions where the landlord strikes our neighbour as 'perfectly sensible', because such occasions of course do occur. He is far from giving a rounded picture; for that would have no comic impact at all. The *street scene*, perforce adopting a wider angle of vision, at this point lands in difficulties that must not be underestimated. It has to be just as successful in promoting criticism, but the incidents in question are far more complex. It must promote positive as well as negative criticism, and as part of a single process. You have to understand what is involved in winning the audience's approval by means of a *critical* approach. Here again we have a precedent in our street scene, that is, in any demonstration of an everyday sort. Our next door neighbour as well as our street demonstrator can reproduce their subject's 'sensible' or 'senseless' behaviour alike, by submitting it for an opinion. When it crops up, however, in the course of events (when a person switches from being sensible to being senseless, or the other way round), then they usually need some form of commentary in order to change the angle of their portrayal. Hence, as already mentioned, certain difficulties arise for the *theatre scene*. These cannot be dealt with here.
- <sup>5</sup> The same situation will be produced by all those people whose characters fulfil the conditions laid down by him and show the features that he imitates.
- <sup>6</sup> Most clearly worked out by Stanislavsky.
- <sup>7</sup> To G. Lukács in particular *Das Wort* owes some most notable essays that shed light on the concept of realism, even if in my opinion they define it rather too narrowly.
- \* [Editor's note: At this point Brecht quotes the first section of 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*' in Part One, pp. 61–2.]

## Part Three

# Return to Germany

## Introduction to Part Three

**Part Three** includes selections from the final years of Brecht's life, from his arrival in Europe until his death in August 1956 in East Berlin. They reflect his return to intensive work in the theatre at the newly established Berliner Ensemble in 1949 and his attempts to clarify his theatre theory, including the *Short Organon* (1949) on his concept of the director's work in the theatre, the volume *Theaterarbeit* (*Theatre Work*, 1952) presenting performance and dramaturgical problems based on productions of the Berliner Ensemble and 'Dialectics in the Theatre' (posthumously published in 1957), apparently his last attempt to overhaul his entire theory one more time. These texts detail both his practical theatre work and his complex relationship to the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Brecht was among the most talented and prominent exile artists to settle in East Berlin and wished to play a role in negotiating the rebuilding of a socialist, humanist Germany, but he quickly encountered opposition from an emerging socialist orthodoxy that had little tolerance during the escalation of the Cold War for his unconventional aesthetics and Marxism. His dramatic theory ran counter to Stanislavsky's method, which had been instantiated together with Socialist Realism as the new state's cultural policy. His treatment of the cultural heritage, based on the concept of historicization, did not deliver the uplifting role models of proletarian positive heroes that the Socialist Party expected. He encountered repeated efforts by cultural functionaries to discipline internal dissent and had to recognize finally that art was not going to play a major role in the transformation of this society.

In the wake of Brecht's hearing at the House Un-American Activities Committee, he and his wife Helene Weigel left the United States for Switzerland in November 1947. They took up residence in Feldmeilen, near Zurich, where they remained until their move in October 1948 to East Berlin in post-war Germany's Soviet Zone of Occupation. While in Switzerland, Brecht was

involved in two major projects: a co-production of Sophocles' *Antigone* with Caspar Neher and the composition of the *Short Organon for the Theatre*. Weigel had suggested that Brecht should write a programmatic summary of his ideas on theatre – which had been fermenting since the mid-1930s – in order to help establish himself in East Berlin. In post-war Germany, he was not a celebrated playwright and director renowned for his theoretical reflections on theatre. He was best known to the general public as the librettist of Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, thanks to recordings of the songs and G. W. Pabst's feature film of 1931. In Marxist circles, on the other hand, he was notorious for his scepticism towards the official Soviet Marxist aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism.

The *Short Organon* was published in January 1949 in a special Brecht issue of the cultural periodical *Sinn und Form (Meaning and Form)*. It was bookended by articles from theatre critic and dramaturge Herbert Ihering and the Marxist literary scholar Hans Mayer presenting Brecht as the people's playwright, and followed by *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – a play set in a Soviet enclave in the throes of reconstruction after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Although the *Short Organon* primarily cites Brecht's *Life of Galileo* as an exemplar of epic theatre, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was the first of his later plays to be published in Germany, so that contemporary readers would have seen Brecht's theory of theatre illustrated by a technically more radical play than *Life of Galileo*.

The *Short Organon* is Brecht's single most substantial account of the theory and practice of epic theatre and together with the *Messingkauf/Buying Brass* (see *Brecht on Performance*) is his best-known work in this area. It is, however, much more than a mere handbook for theatre practitioners. Brecht's views on theatre are embedded in more general discussions concerning modern science and technology; Marxist social and cultural theory; aesthetics and politics; and the possibility of developing a new kind of artistic realism that draws on the insights of modern (social) science and the estranging aesthetic innovations of European modernism, as outlined in his 'Notes on the Realist Mode of Writing' (*Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp. 242–62). In his essay in the same volume on non-representational painting (pp. 239–42), Brecht notes the importance of 'seeing differently', a modernist motif that permeates his discussion of representation in the *Short Organon*. This revised translation highlights the visual metaphors in Brecht's text – the new gaze which is a strange gaze (§44), both scientific and artistic, discernible versus visible (§30), seeing versus staring (§26), spectating versus looking (§77).

This broader intellectual context for Brecht's discussion of theatre is also indicated by the work's title. Willett translates Brecht's *Kleines Organon* as *A Short Organum* in order to highlight the relationship between Brecht and Francis

Bacon, and, as Willett notes, Brecht even adopts Bacon's style of presentation – seventy-seven numbered sections of varying length, which in Bacon's case are termed 'aphorisms'. At the same time, Willett's rendering of *Organon* as *Organum* obscures the tripartite intertextual relationship between Brecht, Bacon and Aristotle. Bacon's *Novum Organum* of 1620, the founding work of modern philosophy of science – *Neues Organon* in the translation Brecht used – is a critique of Aristotle's philosophical *Organon*, but Brecht also positions himself against Aristotle's *Poetics* – his *Organon* is aimed at the theatre. Moreover, just as one of Brecht's annotations to Aristotle's *Poetics* compares his non-Aristotelian theatre to non-Euclidean geometry, so Bacon writes at the beginning of the modern scientific age and Brecht at its dystopian apogee: from *New Atlantis* to Hiroshima, to coin a phrase. Like Bacon's, Brecht's *Organon* engages with science – not just natural science and technology, but also that new science of society whose methodology is grounded in 'die materialistische Dialektik' (§45). Yet Brecht never explicitly cites Marx in the *Short Organon*, nor – to use Willett's translation – does he refer to dialectical materialism, the theoretical keystone of orthodox Marxism. The term Brecht uses – 'materialist dialectic' – is taken from his philosophical mentor Karl Korsch and signifies the heterodox nature of Brecht's Marxism as he is about to relocate to East Berlin.

The 'Prologue' in the *Organon* is also modelled on Bacon's inductive scientific method, albeit in a somewhat disingenuous manner. Brecht presents his work as an objective empirical inquiry into the premises of a particular kind of theatrical practice that had developed in the Weimar Republic, yet these are premises whose primary documentary sources consist in Brecht's own writings! His impish intellectual game with the attentive reader reaches its climax in the ostensible recantation at the end of the Prologue, which is clearly modelled on Galileo's. Taken as a whole, however, the *Short Organon* is neither a recantation of Brecht's earlier views on aesthetics and theatre, nor the coming-out of a closet Aristotelian. Just as Galileo's *Discorsi* are smuggled out of Italy under the cover of Aristotle, so Brecht is infiltrating his own subversive variant of Marxist modernism into the realm of Socialist Realism.

Its scientific aspirations notwithstanding, the major part of the *Short Organon* is concerned with theatre, in particular the theatre appropriate for the modern scientific age that Brecht, his audience and his readers inhabit (§20–25). Crucially, the spectators in Brecht's new theatre must be enabled to adopt an attitude of critique – where critique is indissolubly linked to praxis in the form of social revolution (§22; see also the carnival sequence in *Life of Galileo*, scene 10). This political dimension comes as something of a surprise after the opening sections (§1–14), where Brecht had emphasized the theatre's role in producing

representations of the way people live together for the purpose of entertainment and rejected didactic moralizing. Nevertheless, the entertainment that Brecht's theatre will provide involves a synthesis of pleasure and learning, while its representations will be sociologically grounded and emphasize the contradictory nature of historical processes (§35–41). In order to achieve these aims, Brecht's theatre will reject the Naturalistic representational conventions of bourgeois theatre together with its ideological functions, whereby its spectators exchange a contradictory world for a harmonious one and so passively accept the socio-economic and political status quo (§26–34).

The remainder of the *Short Organon* (§42–77) outlines the techniques to be deployed in Brecht's theatre for a scientific age. He discusses *Verfremdung* (§42–46); plot (§64–70); the role of other arts such as music, stage design and choreography (§71–74); and, most important of all, acting (§47–63). In fact, some two-thirds of Brecht's disquisition on theatrical techniques concerns acting, partly because of his recent experiences in working with Charles Laughton in the 1947 production of *Life of Galileo*. But Brecht is also concerned to clarify his contentious and controversial views on acting (see 'Notes on the Comedy *Man Equals Man*' in [Part One](#)): why actors should not identify with their role (§47–51); the contradictory relationship between the dramatic personage's character and deeds (§52–3); the importance of precise observation (§54); the actor's sociopolitical stance (§55–7); interactive and collective development of characters (§58–60); and *gestus* (§61–3).

The final three sections of the *Short Organon* (§75–77) strike a more sombre note. Brecht remarks somewhat sardonically that in Germany materialism has never been more than an idea, pleasure tends to be reduced to duty and learning is dismal. Moreover, even in his own theatre the ease and lightness of being that he attributes to artistic production is overshadowed by the spectre of his spectators' terrible and never-ending labours and the horror of their own incessant transformation. It may well be that the darker tone of this final section is tinged by Brecht's awareness of the nightmarish aspects of modernity – as he observed in 1948, when working on it: 'The events in Auschwitz, in the Warsaw ghetto, in Buchenwald would doubtless not bear any literary description. Literature was not prepared for such events, nor has it developed any means of describing them' ('Conversations with Young Intellectuals', *Brecht on Art and Politics*, p. 304).

Once the *Short Organon* had been published, the need to complete a theoretical work receded behind the practical work in the theatre and problems with the state's cultural policy. The 1952 *Theatre Work* volume, where the first two selections in the section 'Theatre Work' first appeared, should be viewed



together with the other texts against the backdrop of the debate on formalism in the arts that was 'imported' from the Soviet Union beginning in 1950. The volume, edited by collaborators at the theatre, documents six productions of the Berliner Ensemble (see also *Brecht on Performance*). As a kind of handbook with articles about all the different aspects of work in the theatre, it could be seen as a practical supplement to the *Short Organon*, offered in the spirit of making suggestions that could help bring forth conditions necessary for changing the world. In that sense, *Theatre Work* and more generally the texts in this section represent interim status reports but also responses to the polemics of the epic theatre's critics.

Both the dialogue between Friedrich Wolf and Brecht and the following letter to an actor reveal one of Brecht's favourite methods of setting out embryonic ideas: a form of dialogic writing that allows him to adopt an attitude of inter-subjective exchange, not unlike the earlier 'A Short Private Lecture' addressed to Max Gorelik (see [Part Two](#)). The dialogue was in fact a series of written questions that Wolf published with Brecht's written responses, and the letter was not meant for a specific actor but rather is a fictive epistle. In the case of the former, the questions posed by dramatist Wolf are naive and uninformed to the extreme, allowing Brecht to place ideas in his adversary's mouth that are easy to parry, for example, that epic theatre is undramatic theatre and thus questionable as theatre at all. This provides Brecht an opening to defend his theory and specifically his 1949 production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Consequently, he can once again point out the need for emotions in epic theatre and explain the dialectic of an audience's capacity to learn even from the negative example of the protagonist: 'even if Courage learns nothing else, at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her.' The letter to the actor takes up concrete issues about the art of performance, clarity of pronunciation, the use of dialect and the economy of the voice. In the same vein, the following three texts are random comments on the actor's calling, on the difference between a gesture and a gestus and on the crucial contribution of the costume designer for the historical enrichment of a stage production.

One of the mainstays of the Berliner Ensemble productions were the adaptations of classical dramas. These were aesthetic experiments fuelled by Brecht's notion of historicization, drawing on folk material and pre-bourgeois theatre traditions to develop a new approach 'from below', that is, from a plebeian perspective on familiar narratives. In late April 1952, Brecht's master students staged Goethe's *Urfaust* under his supervision at the Potsdam theatre, and the two dictated notes about it suggest Brecht's experimental strategy of testing the material. The production had a run of nineteen performances and was

then revived at the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin in March 1953. Simultaneously, Brecht became embroiled in the controversy that developed around his composer friend Hanns Eisler's *Faustus* opera that was criticized by none other than the head of state, Walter Ulbricht, in late May 1953 (see *Brecht on Art and Politics*, Part Five). Brecht's deviations from orthodox Socialist Realism, his insistence on anti-empathetic realism and his resistance to the Stanislavsky 'system' were slowly but surely manoeuvring him into the risky position of an internal dissenter, under pressure to publically recant his aesthetic positions. Just in the nick of time, the political tensions in the young socialist republic exploded on 17 June 1953, when workers first in East Berlin and then around the country began to demonstrate against the government's economic policies, almost toppling Ulbricht until Soviet tanks restored order. The change in atmosphere is reflected in the important essay 'Classical Status as an Intimidating Factor', written in 1954, after the government's New Course had been implemented. Brecht takes the opportunity to reassess the classics in the spirit of historicization, drawing on the example of the *Urfaust* production to show how the focus on the plight of the underclass of the eighteenth century provides a mirror for Germany's own recent history, demonstrating that the working class has to think for itself and not trust the promises of those in power.

The next section 'On Stanislavsky' bears witness to Brecht's compulsion to measure himself against this official rival and his system. The cultural authorities in the GDR followed the Soviet lead and identified Stanislavsky with the key principles of Socialist Realism – mimetic realism, partisanship, mass appeal – and considered his system to be the only valid one for realizing it in the theatre, while Brecht's stage productions were seen as 'formalistic' and suspected of being a Trojan horse for Western modernism. Yet compared to the earlier critical and dismissive accounts of Stanislavsky based on his experiences with the 'Method' in New York City (see especially 'On Experimental Theatre' in [Part Two](#)), the comments in the 1950s reveal a more conciliatory, sometimes even an enthusiastic tone, as emerges in the first three selections in this section. Now Brecht's critique is aimed mainly at those who think Stanislavsky provides a cookie cutter practice that can turn out realistic theatre from any dough, rather than adapting the careful techniques of observation and rehearsal that the system calls for. Certainly this was motivated to some extent by tactical considerations: Brecht wanted to deflect the sense of a strict opposition between Stanislavsky's directorial and pedagogical programme and his own theatre practice and theory, but in fact as he examined him more closely, he did see commonalities in the way they both worked in the theatre.

Parallel to the crisis that was brewing in 1953 over Brecht's adaptation of

classical plays was the pressure on him to conform to the mandate of Socialist Realism. In January 1953, the State Commission for Artistic Affairs announced that a Stanislavsky conference would be held at the Academy of Arts, where Brecht was a leading member, to bring together dramatists, theatre practitioners, academics and cultural functionaries to debate and popularize what theatres could and should learn from Stanislavsky's system. It was a clear challenge to epic theatre orchestrated by hardliners in the government. After the formalism debates of the early 1950s, Brecht saw the conference scheduled for 17–19 April 1953 as something for which the Berliner Ensemble had to prepare a counter-campaign. Thus, it was no coincidence that in late February he began rehearsals for *Katzgraben*, a play about village politics in East Germany by Erwin Strittmatter, notable for being Brecht's only attempt at staging contemporary material but also at testing his ideas in the *Short Organon* against Stanislavsky (see the production notes in *Brecht on Performance* as well as *Brecht on Art and Politics*, Part Five). 'On Stanislavsky' and 'Stanislavsky Studies [3]' are two short commentaries emerging from those rehearsals. 'A Few Thoughts on the Stanislavsky Conference' once again reveals his tactical cleverness, dwelling on many positive details of Stanislavsky's realism but criticizing their faulty realization by dogmatic practitioners among his colleagues in the theatre. Here too the extraordinary events of 17 June 1953 functioned like a pressure release valve. Although Brecht found himself suddenly confronted with an estranged world, having been traumatized by the spectre of what he perceived as resurgent Nazism, he abandoned neither his ideological commitment nor his loyalty to the GDR government.

During the last year of his life, Brecht seemed to be overhauling his entire theory yet again with a view to presenting it under the new label of 'dialectical theatre', as detailed in the articles of the third section. Like so many of Brecht's concepts, this was one that had already existed in embryo before 1933, in an essay called 'Dialectical Dramatic Writing' and then apparently renamed 'non-Aristotelian' (see 'Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*', both in [Part One](#)). Now, however, the term 'epic theatre' was to be discarded in its favour. Brecht wrote in a short note introducing the collection of texts 'Dialectics in the Theatre': 'The attempt is being made here to describe the application of materialist dialectic in the theatre. The concept of "epic theatre" increasingly seems to need such a substantial elaboration.' In view of the objective conditions and the level of consciousness about antagonistic contradictions between the old and the new in post-war divided Germany Brecht saw the need to define more precisely the terms that described this historical situation. In the 1954 essay 'From Epic to Dialectical Theatre 2', he explicitly rejects epic theatre as a concept that had

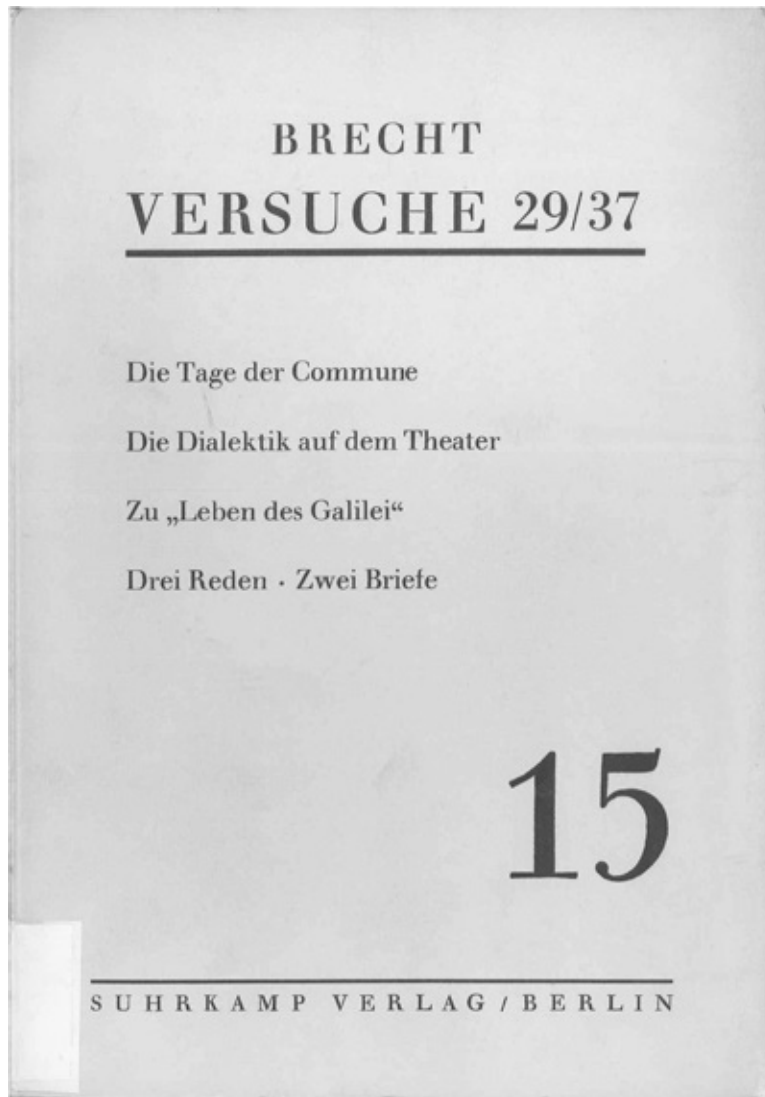
exhausted its usefulness. Because the audience had achieved at least to some extent a new attitude in the theatre, reacting to the material by becoming storytellers themselves, theatre now could show the audience how to become 'co-inventors' of their stories from the perspective of those who are most likely and most impatient to change society.

The nine texts written between 1951 and 1955 (most actually written in 1953 and 1954 around the crisis of 17 June) comprise, together with a ten-line introduction, the collection called 'Dialectics in the Theatre', published as experiment or *Versuch* 37 in the last of the *Versuche* volumes, number 15 (1957). In essence, it comes closest to launching the idea of dialectical theatre Brecht had outlined in the appendices to the *Short Organon*, referring to specific productions in which he himself had participated either directly or indirectly except for the very last text. To this extent it serves as an extension of the *Short Organon* and *Messingkauf/Buying Brass* (for the latter, see *Brecht on Performance*), one that demonstrates in the specific post-war situation a mode of thinking adequate to the task of constructing a new society in view of Germany's recent past. Although the collection may appear to be random or makeshift and without a coherent argument, the dominance of 'dialogic' texts is a distinguishing feature of Brecht's preferred approach to theory by this point, the inter-subjective exchange developing out of observation and knowledge mentioned earlier.

'Dialectics in the Theatre' consists of three fictive dialogues (with his apprentice collaborators Peter Palitzsch, Manfred Wekwerth and Käthe Rüllicke), a fictive letter, three short texts resembling the Keuner stories or the aphorisms of Me-Ti, which are generally characterized as dialogic, and two more traditional, theory-oriented reflections ('Relative Haste' and 'Mother Courage Played in Two Ways'). Central to each is the principle of contradiction. In the dialogue about the first scene of *Coriolanus*, for example, taking up two-thirds of the collection and forming its backbone, the contradictions are not simply detected and described but also examined as they unfold; alternative ways of viewing the contradictions in the play are discussed in terms of their ability to promote or hinder further questioning. Or in 'A Detour' Brecht suggests – after remarking on why a certain scene cannot reasonably be cut in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in order to shorten a long play – that the actress playing Grusha must find a way to express the contradiction between her self-interest (leaving the child who is not her own to the wealthy biological mother) and her basic humanity that generates her affection for the abandoned child she had saved in a time of crisis. In each case, it is a matter of trying out different possibilities and examining the results, as if it were a scientific experiment. This, then, is Brecht's

‘theory of the theatre’ for which theatre itself offers a model: it is dialectics at work, growing out of practice and changing that very practice in a feedback loop that resembles a conversation always in motion (see [Plate 29](#)).

The book closes with four miscellaneous texts that evince Brecht’s fine-tuned insistence on carving out a space for his own view of theatre. ‘Cultural Policy and Academy of Arts’, like the above-mentioned ‘Classical Status as an Intimidating Factor’, is one of several essays Brecht wrote after the events of June 17 to promote his expectations about changes in the party’s political course, in this case concerning cultural policies. Prominent among them was the need to modernize the state by allowing more autonomy for the different social domains, such as the arts. This would allow artists to develop the creative potential of their contradictions without interventions from the political leadership, as Brecht had experienced first-hand between 1950 and 1953. The brief unpublished note ‘Socialist Realism in the Theatre’ is an example of his pragmatic effort to balance the defence of his own realism and his critique of canonized Socialist Realism. Symptomatic is the way he bends Socialist Realism’s didacticism and moralizing to adapt to his own terminology of pleasure in changing the world. His statement read at a 1955 theatre congress in West Germany, ‘Can the Present-day World Be Reproduced by Means of Theatre?’, echoes the same theme. He acknowledges other approaches to the theatre but defends his decision to pursue his approach in East Germany because ‘in the state where I live ... an effort is being made to change the world and people’s life together’. The last, dictated message to his theatre ensemble, written by an exhausted and sick Brecht nine days before his heart failed, shows no trace of resignation or loss of acuity. He goes straight to the challenge of the upcoming tour to London where the audience knows no German (‘like a silent film on stage!’) and harbours a strong prejudice against German art as tedious. His advice is to use the opportunity to demonstrate the Ensemble’s artistry to communicate the fun (*Spass*) of making theatre that can change the world.



**Figure 6** Facsimile *Versuche* 15, 'Dialectics in the Theatre', published posthumously in 1957.

Marc Silberman and Steve Giles

## *Short Organon*

*Short Organon for the Theatre*

## Prologue

The following essay examines what an aesthetic might look like, derived from a particular kind of theatrical performance that has been in practical development for the past few decades. In the occasional theoretical statements, polemics and technical instructions published in the form of notes to the author's plays, aesthetics has been touched on only casually and with a relative lack of interest. A particular species of theatre could be seen extending or narrowing its social function, supplementing or sifting through its artistic methods, and establishing or asserting its aesthetic credentials – if the subject arose – by ignoring or citing in its own cause the ruling conventions of morality or taste according to the state of the struggle. It defended its inclination to social commitment, for instance, by pointing out the social commitment present in generally accepted works of art, which had remained unnoticed only because it was the accepted type of commitment. It defined the removal of anything worth knowing from contemporary productions as a symptom of decline: it accused these retailers of evening entertainment of having degenerated into a branch of the bourgeois narcotics trade. The stage's false representations of social life, including those of so-called Naturalism, led it to call for scientifically exact representations, and the tasteless culinarity of vapid feasts for the eye or soul led it to call for the elegant logic of the multiplication table. The cult of beauty, which was being practised with hostility towards learning and contempt for the useful, it scornfully rejected, especially as nothing beautiful was being produced any more. A theatre for the scientific age was the objective, and if its planners found it too arduous to borrow or steal enough weapons from the armoury of aesthetic concepts to fend off the aesthetes of the press, then they simply threatened 'to turn the means of enjoyment into an object of instruction and convert certain institutions from entertainment establishments into organs of mass communication' ('Notes to the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*', see [Part One](#)), in other words to emigrate from the realm of the agreeable. Aesthetics, the heirloom of a by now depraved and parasitic class, was in such a lamentable state that a theatre could only gain both esteem and elbow room to by calling itself *thaëter* instead. And yet in terms of its practical realization, the theatre for a scientific age was not science but theatre, and the accumulated innovations worked out during the Nazi period and the war – when practical demonstrations were impossible – have now led to our attempt to examine this species of theatre in relation to aesthetics, or at any rate to indicate the outlines of a conceivable aesthetic for this species.

Expounding the theory of theatrical *Verfremdung*, for instance, without reference to an aesthetic theory would simply be too difficult.

Today one could go so far as to compile an aesthetic of the exact sciences. It was Galileo who spoke of the elegance of certain formulae and the wit of experimentation, Einstein maintains that the sense of beauty has a part to play in discovery, and the atomic physicist R. Oppenheimer praises the scientific attitude, which 'has its own kind of beauty and seems to suit humanity's position on earth'.

Let us therefore cause general regret by revoking our intention to emigrate from the realm of the agreeable, and even more general regret by announcing our intention from now on to take up residence in that realm. Let us treat the theatre as a place of entertainment, as is proper in an aesthetic theory, and let us examine which type of entertainment suits us best!

## 1

'Theatre' consists in producing living representations of reported or invented events involving human beings, for the purpose of entertainment. At any rate that is what we shall mean in what follows when we speak of theatre, whether old or new.

## 2

If we wished to cover more ground we could also add events involving human beings and gods, but as we are only looking for a minimal definition we can leave such matters aside. Even if we did expand the scope of our discussion, we should still have to describe the 'theatre' set-up's most general function as giving pleasure. It is the noblest function that we have found for 'theatre'.

## 3

Since time immemorial, the theatre's business has been to entertain people, just like all the other arts. This business always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport than fun, though this it must have. There is no way of giving it a higher status, for instance by turning it into a purveyor of morality; in which case it would have to make sure that it wasn't being debased, which would happen at once if it failed to make its moral aspect enjoyable, and enjoyable to



the senses at that – a process, admittedly, from which the moral aspect can only benefit. Not even instruction should be expected of it, at any rate nothing more useful than how to move pleurably, whether in physical or mental terms. Theatre must be permitted to remain entirely superfluous, which in turn does mean that we live for superfluity. And nothing needs less justification than our pleasures.

4

Thus what the ancients, following Aristotle, demanded of tragedy is nothing higher or lower than entertaining people. When people say that theatre emerged from ritual, all they are saying is that it became theatre thanks to that shift; what it brought over from the mysteries was not its ritual function, but purely and simply the pleasure that accompanied it. And the catharsis of which Aristotle writes, cleansing by fear and pity or from fear and pity, is an ablution which was performed not only in a pleasurable way, but precisely for the purpose of pleasure. To demand more of the theatre or concede more to it is simply to set one's own mark too low.

5

Even when people speak of higher and lower kinds of pleasure, art stares back at them stony-faced, for it wishes to fly high and low and to be left in peace, if by so doing it gives people pleasure.

6

Having said that, the theatre can provide weak (simple) and strong (composite) pleasures. The latter, which are what we are dealing with in great drama, reach their climaxes rather as intercourse does in the case of love; they are more intricate, more richly mediated, more contradictory and more momentous.

7

And the pleasures of different eras varied of course according to the way people lived together at the time. The demos of the Greek circus, which was ruled by tyrants, had to be entertained differently from the feudal court of Louis XIV. The theatre had to provide different representations of the way people lived together,

not just representations of different ways of living together, but also representations of a different kind.

## 8

According to the sort of entertainment that was possible and necessary depending on the way people lived together, the characters had to be given varying proportions and the situations had to be constructed according to varying points of view. Stories have to be told in quite different ways, so as to make it possible for those ancient Greeks to be entertained by the inevitability of divine laws, with no mitigation of punishment for ignorance of them, those French by the graceful self-discipline that the courtly code of duty demands of the great ones of this earth, the English of the Elizabethan age by the self-reflection of the new individual that was revelling in its own freedom.

## 9

And we must bear in mind that pleasure in representations of such different kinds hardly ever depended on the degree of the depiction's similarity to what was being represented. Inaccuracy, or even considerable improbability, was hardly ever or not at all disturbing, so long as the inaccuracy had a certain consistency and the improbability remained of the same order. It sufficed if the illusion of a compelling momentum in the respective stories was created by all sorts of poetic and theatrical means. We too are happy to overlook such inconsistencies if we manage to scrounge something from the spiritual ablutions of Sophocles or the sacrificial acts of Racine or the rampaging figures in Shakespeare, by trying to grasp the beautiful or noble feelings of the principal characters in these stories.

## 10

For among all the many types of representations of significant events involving human beings that have been produced in the theatre since ancient times and have entertained despite their inaccuracy and improbability, even today there is an astonishing number that entertain us too.

## 11

Having established our capacity to enjoy representations from such different ages, something that could hardly have been possible for the children of those vigorous ages, must we not at the same time harbour the suspicion that we have failed so far to discover the special pleasures, the proper entertainment of our own age?

## 12

And our enjoyment of the theatre must have become weaker than that of the ancients, even if our way of living together is still sufficiently like theirs for our enjoyment to come about at all. We grasp the old works by means of a comparatively new procedure, empathy, on which they do not rely very much. Thus the greater part of our enjoyment is drawn from sources other than those which our predecessors must have been able to exploit so fully. Then we make up for all that with beauty of language, elegance of plot construction, passages that elicit from us independent ideas, in short, with the incidentals of the old works. These are precisely the poetical and theatrical means that conceal the inconsistencies in the story. Our theatres no longer have either the capacity or the desire to tell these stories clearly, even the relatively recent ones of the great Shakespeare, *i.e.* to make the tying-together of the events credible. And according to Aristotle the plot – and we share that view – is the soul of drama. We are increasingly disturbed to see crude and careless representations of the way people live together, not just in the old works but also in contemporary ones produced according to the old recipes. Our kind of enjoyment really is starting to get out of date.

## 13

These inconsistencies in the way events involving human beings are represented diminish our enjoyment in the theatre. The reason why: we have a different relationship from our forebears to what is being represented.

## 14

For whenever we look about us for a kind of entertainment whose impact is immediate, for a comprehensive and continuous pleasure such as our theatre could give us with representations of the way people live together, we must think

of ourselves as the children of a scientific age. The way we live together as human beings – and that means: our livelihood – is determined by the sciences to a quite new extent.

## 15

A few hundred years ago several people, working in different countries but in correspondence with one another, conducted certain experiments by means of which they hoped to wrest nature's secrets from her. Members of a class of craftsmen in the already powerful cities, they transmitted their discoveries to people who made practical use of them, without expecting much more from the new sciences than personal profit for themselves. Crafts which had made do with methods virtually unchanged for a thousand years now developed enormously, in many places, which they linked through competition, gathering together from all directions great masses of people, who by being organized in a new way started producing on a gigantic scale. Soon humanity was demonstrating powers whose extent it would scarcely have dared to dream of previously.

## 16

It was as if humanity for the first time now made a conscious and coordinated effort to make the planet it lived on inhabitable. Many of its constituent parts, such as coal, water, oil, were transformed into treasures. Steam was ordered to move vehicles; a few small sparks and the twitching of frogs' legs revealed a natural force that produced light, carried sounds across continents, *etc.* Humanity looked around in all directions with a new gaze, to establish how long-seen but as yet unexploited objects could be utilized for its convenience. Its surroundings were transformed more and more, from decade to decade, then from year to year, then almost from day to day. I who am writing this am writing it on a machine that at the time of my birth was unknown. I travel around in the new vehicles at a speed that my grandfather could not have imagined; nothing moved so fast in those days. And I can rise up in the air, something my father was unable to do. I spoke with my father from another continent, but it was only with my son that I saw the moving pictures of the explosion at Hiroshima.

## 17

While the new sciences may have made possible such a vast alteration and above all alterability of our surroundings, it cannot be said that their spirit definitively fills us. The reason why the new way of thinking and feeling has not yet really penetrated the great masses of humanity is that the sciences, for all their success in exploiting and dominating nature, are being prevented by the class which owes its power to them, the bourgeoisie, from operating in another field where darkness still reigns, that of the relations people have to one another when exploiting and dominating nature. This business, on which all alike depended, was conducted without the new intellectual methods that had made it possible being able to clarify the mutual relationships of those who were conducting it. The new gaze on nature was not directed towards society.

## 18

In fact people's mutual relationships have become more opaque than ever before. The gigantic joint undertaking in which they are engaged seems to divide them more and more, increases in production lead to increases in misery, and only a few gain from the exploitation of nature, *i.e.* by exploiting people. What might be progress for all becomes advancement for a few, and an ever-increasing part of production is utilized to create means of destruction for mighty wars. During these wars the mothers of every nation, with their children pressed to them, scan the skies in horror for the deadly inventions of science.

## 19

Nowadays humanity adopts the same attitude to its own undertakings as it displayed in the face of unpredictable natural catastrophes in days gone by. The bourgeois class, which owes to science the advancement that it converted into domination by ensuring that it alone reaped the benefits of science, knows quite well that its rule would come to an end if the scientific gaze were directed towards its own undertakings. And so the new science that deals with the nature of human society, and was founded about a hundred years ago, was founded on the struggle between rulers and ruled.\* Since then a certain scientific spirit has developed in the lower depths, among the new class of workers whose natural element is large-scale production: from down there the great catastrophes are sighted as enterprises of the rulers.

\*Editor's note: The 'new science' of society is Marxism; *The Communist*

*Manifesto*, by Marx and Engels, was first published in 1848.

## 20

But science and art have a shared concern, in that both are there to make human life easier, the one setting out to sustain us, the other to entertain us. In the age to come, art will create entertainment from the new productivity that can so greatly improve our sustenance and, if only it is left unshackled, could itself be the greatest pleasure of them all.

## 21

If we now want to surrender ourselves to this great passion for producing, what must our representations of the way people live together look like? What is the productive attitude in relation to nature and society that we children of a scientific age want to adopt pleasurably in our theatre?

## 22

That attitude is a critical one. In relation to a river it consists in regulating the river; in relation to a fruit tree in grafting a cutting on to the fruit tree, in relation to locomotion in designing vehicles and aeroplanes, in relation to society in revolutionizing society. We produce our representations of the way people live together for river engineers, fruit farmers, vehicle designers and social revolutionaries, whom we invite into our theatres and whom we ask not to forget their cheerful interests when they are with us, while we hand the world over to their brains and hearts for them to change as they see fit.

## 23

The theatre can, of course, only adopt such a free attitude if it lets itself be carried along by the strongest currents in society and associates itself with those who are necessarily the most impatient to bring about great changes in society. If nothing else, then the mere wish to develop an art fit for the times will drive our theatre for the scientific age straight out into the suburbs, where it will stand, as it were, with open doors, at the disposal of the broad masses who produce much and have difficult lives, so that they can be usefully entertained in it by their own

great problems. They may find it hard to pay for our art and may not grasp the new kind of entertainment without more ado, and in many respects we shall have to learn what they need and how they need it, but we can be sure of their interest. For these people who seem to have no contact with natural science only have no contact with it because they are being kept away from it, and in order to get their hands on it, they themselves must first develop and practise a new science of society and so become the true children of the scientific age, and its theatre cannot get moving unless they get it moving. A theatre that makes productivity its main source of entertainment must also make productivity its theme, and with a particular keenness today when people everywhere are being prevented by other people from producing themselves, in other words from securing their own sustenance, from being entertained and from entertaining themselves. The theatre must engage with reality if it is to be able to produce effective representations of reality, and is to be allowed to do so.

## 24

But this makes it easier for the theatre to move as close as possible to establishments for learning and mass communication. For although it cannot be pestered with all kinds of knowledge, which would prevent it from being enjoyable, it is still at liberty to find enjoyment in learning and inquiry. It constructs its practicable representations of society, which are able to influence society, entirely as a game: for those who are constructing society, it presents society's experiences, past and present alike, in such a way that the audience can 'enjoy' the sensations, insights and motivations that the wisest, most passionate and most active among us derive from the events of the day and the century. Let them be entertained with the wisdom that comes from solving problems, with the anger into which sympathy with the oppressed can be productively transformed, with respect for respecting humanity, in other words philanthropy, in short with everything that delights those who are productive.

## 25

And this also means that the theatre can let its spectators enjoy the particular mores of their age, which spring from productivity. As it turns critique, *i.e.* the great productive method, into pleasure, there is nothing in the ethical field that theatre must do and a great deal that it can do. Even the anti-social can be a source of enjoyment to society so long as it is presented energetically and on a

grand scale. It then often displays powers of understanding and various other capacities of considerable value, applied admittedly to a destructive end. Indeed, even a river catastrophically breaking its banks can be enjoyed in all its majesty by society, if society is able to master it: then society makes the river its own.

26

For an undertaking such as this, however, we can hardly let the theatre in its current state remain as it is. Let us go into one of these houses and observe the effect it has on the spectators. Looking about us, we see somewhat motionless figures in a peculiar condition: they seem to be tensing all their muscles really strenuously, except where these are flabby from real exhaustion. They scarcely communicate with one other, their mental state resembles that of people who are just sleeping, yet have restless dreams because, as the people say of those who have nightmares, they are lying on their backs. True, their eyes are open, yet they do not see, but stare, just as they do not listen, but eavesdrop. They look at the stage as if they are spellbound, a term that comes from the Middle Ages, the era of witches and clerics. Seeing and listening are activities, and can be pleasant ones, but these people seem to have been relieved of any activity and resemble people to whom something is being done. This state of rapture, in which they seem to be in thrall to vague but intense sensations, is more profound the greater the skill of the actors, so that we, since we dislike this state, should like the actors to be as bad as possible.

27

As for the world represented in that process, from which excerpts are taken in order to produce these moods and emotional responses, a world produced from such slight and wretched stuff as a few pieces of cardboard, a little mimicry, a bit of text, it appears on stage in such a way that one can only admire the theatre folk who with such a feeble imitation of the world can stir the emotions of their attuned spectators so much more powerfully than the world itself could ever do.

28

In any case we should excuse these theatre folk, for they could not produce the pleasures they purvey for money and fame with more accurate representations of the world, nor could they present their inaccurate representations in a less magical way. Their ability to represent people we can see at work everywhere;



the rogues and the minor characters in particular show traces of their knowledge of humanity and are differentiated one from the other, but the central characters must be kept at a general level, so that it is easier for the spectator to identify with them, and in any case every character trait must be drawn from that narrow range within which everyone can say at once: yes, that's how it is. For the spectator wishes to be put in possession of quite specific sensations, just as a child does when it climbs on to one of the wooden horses on a merry-go-round: the sensation of pride that it can ride and has a horse; the pleasure of being carried and whirled past other children; the adventurous dreams in which it is being pursued or pursues others, *etc.* For the child to experience all this, the degree to which its wooden seat resembles a horse counts for very little, nor does it matter that the ride is confined to a small circle. All that concerns the spectators in these houses is that they are able to exchange a contradictory world for a harmonious one, a world they do not know very well for one they can dream of.

## 29

Such is the current state of the theatre that our undertaking is faced with, and so far it has been fully able to transform our hopeful friends, whom we have called the children of the scientific century, into a cowed, credulous, 'spellbound' crowd.

## 30

True, for about half a century they have been able to see somewhat more faithful representations of the way people live together, as well as characters who rebelled against certain social evils or even against the structure of society as a whole. They felt interested enough to put up temporarily with an extraordinary reduction of language, plot and intellectual horizons, for the fresh wind of the scientific spirit almost withered away the novelties they had grown used to. The sacrifices were not particularly worthwhile. The increasing sophistication of the representations damaged one pleasure without satisfying another. The field of human relationships became visible, but not discernible. The sensations that had been generated in the old (magical) way had to remain the old kind of sensations.

## 31

For it has always been the case that theatres were the entertainment establishments of a class which restricted the scientific spirit to the sphere of nature, not daring to let it loose on the field of human relationships. The tiny proletarian section of the audience, reinforced only to a negligible and uncertain degree by renegade brainworkers, also still needed the old kind of entertainment, which eased the burden of their entrenched way of life.

## 32

Still, let us march onwards! What have we got to lose! We've obviously ended up in a battle, so let us fight! Have we not seen how unbelief can move mountains? Is it not enough that we have discovered that something is being kept from us? In front of this and that there hangs a curtain: let us draw it up!

## 33

The theatre in its current state shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium). Oedipus, who has sinned against certain principles underpinning the society of his time, is executed, the gods see to that, they are beyond criticism.\* Shakespeare's great individuals, bearing in their breast the stars of their fate, carry out inexorably their futile and deadly rampages, they destroy themselves, life, not death, becomes obscene as they reach breaking point, the catastrophe is beyond criticism. Human sacrifices, all around! Barbaric delights! We know that the barbarians have their kind of art. Let's produce a different one!

\*Editor's note: Brecht is referring to Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King*; see also 'Latest Stage: Oedipus' and 'Dialogue about Acting' ([Part One](#)).

## 34

How much longer shall our souls, leaving our 'ungainly' bodies under cover of darkness, invade those dreamlike figures up there on stage to share in their ecstasies, which 'otherwise' are denied us? What sort of release is that, given that at the end of all these plays, which is a happy one only for the spirit of the age (providence where providence is due, the order of law), we experience the dreamlike execution that punishes those ecstasies as excesses? We slink into Oedipus, for taboos still exist and ignorance does not protect us from retribution.

Into Othello, for jealousy is still a problem for us and everything depends on property. Into Wallenstein, for we need to be free for the competitive struggle and dutiful, otherwise it would peter out. This incubus of habits is also fostered in plays like *Ghosts* and *The Weavers*, where society is at least presented more problematically in the guise of ‘milieu’.\* As the sensations, insights and motivations of the main characters are forced upon us, we learn no more about society than we can get from the ‘milieu’.

\*Editor’s note: The plays referred to are Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1604); Friedrich Schiller’s *Wallenstein* trilogy (1800); Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts* (1881); Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Weavers* (1892).

## 35

We need a theatre that not only facilitates the sensations, insights and motivations permitted by the particular historical field of human relations on which the action happens to take place, but also employs and produces those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.

## 36

We must be able to characterize the field in historically relative terms. This means breaking with our habit of stripping the different social structures of past ages of everything that makes them different, so that they all look more or less like our own age, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words for all eternity. We, however, want them to retain their distinctiveness and wish to keep in mind their transience, so that our own age too can be construed as transient. (This cannot of course be conveyed by local colour and folklore, which are deployed by our theatres precisely in order to emphasize the similarities in human behaviour in different epochs. We shall indicate the theatrical methods below.)

## 37

If we ensure that our characters on stage are moved by the driving forces of society differentiated according to their epoch, then we make it harder for our spectators to immerse themselves in them. They cannot simply feel: that’s how I would act, but at most can say: if I had lived under those circumstances; and if

we perform plays from our own time as historical plays, it may well be that the circumstances under which our spectators act will strike them as being equally distinctive, and this is where critique begins.

## 38

The 'historical conditions' must not of course be construed (nor will they be constructed) as mysterious powers (behind the scenes), on the contrary, they are created and maintained by people (and are altered by them): they are constituted by people's actions.

## 39

If, then, a person is historicized and responds in a manner in keeping with their epoch, and would respond differently in different epochs, is that person not simply 'Everyman'? It is true that someone will respond differently according to their time or their class; if they were living at a different time, or not for very long, or on the darker side of life, they would inevitably give a different response, though one still determined by the same factors and like anyone else's response in that situation at that time: so should we not ask if there are further differences of response? Where is that person, that living and unmistakable person, the one that is not quite identical with their kind? It is clear that the depiction must make that person visible, and that will come about if this contradiction is embodied in the depiction. A historicizing depiction will contain something of the rough sketches that indicate traces of other movements and features all around the fully worked-out character. Or imagine a man standing in a valley and making a speech in which he occasionally changes his opinion or simply utters sentences that contradict one another, so that the accompanying echo brings them into confrontation.

## 40

Such depictions certainly demand a type of performance that will keep the spectator's mind free and mobile. The attentive mind must, as it were, be able to continuously apply hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the driving forces of society or replacing them with others, through which process current behaviour acquires an element of 'unnaturalness', thereby

enabling the actual driving forces for their part to lose their naturalness and become manipulable.

## 41

It is the same as when a river engineer looks at a river together with its original bed and the various hypothetical courses it might have followed had there been a different tilt to the plateau or a different volume of water. And, while he in his mind is looking at a new river, the socialist in his mind is hearing new kinds of conversations among the land labourers by the river. And that is how our spectator in the theatre should discover that the incidents played out among such land labourers are accompanied by these sketched traces and echoes.

## 42

The type of performance that was tried out at the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre in Berlin between the First and Second World Wars in order to produce such depictions, is based on the ‘*Verfremdung*’ effect (V-effect).\* A representation producing *Verfremdung* is one that allows us to recognize an object, but at the same time makes it appear strange. The classical and medieval theatre estranged its characters by making them wear human or animal masks, the Asiatic theatre even today uses musical and pantomimic V-effects. These V-effects certainly prevented empathy, yet this technique owed more, not less, to hypnotic suggestion than the technique by which empathy is achieved. The social aims of these old effects were entirely different from our own.

\*Editor’s note: The key production is the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* in August 1928, which was followed by Dorothy Lane’s (i.e. Elisabeth Hauptmann) *Happy End* in September 1929. *The Mother* was premiered in the ‘Komödienhaus’ of the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre in January 1932. The performance style Brecht had in mind is discussed in the ‘Introduction’ to [Part One](#).

## 43

The old V-effects completely remove what is being represented from the spectator’s intervention, turning it into something unalterable; the new ones are not bizarre per se, it is the unscientific gaze that stamps anything strange as bizarre. The new kinds of *Verfremdung* were supposed to remove only from

those incidents that can be influenced socially the stamp of familiarity that protects them against intervention today.

## 44

For anything that has not been altered for a long time seems to be unalterable. Everywhere we come across things that are too obvious for us to make the effort to understand them. What people experience among themselves they take to be 'the' human experience. A child, living in a world of old men, learns how things work there. The way things run is the way the child runs with things. Anyone bold enough to wish for something further would only wish for it as an exception. Even if they were to realize that the arrangements made for them by 'Providence' are what society has earmarked for them, they would have the impression that society, this vast collection of beings like themselves, is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts and simply cannot be influenced – and yet they would be familiar with things that cannot be influenced, and who would mistrust what they are familiar with? For them to be able to doubt all these things that they take for granted, they would need to develop that strange gaze with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was astonished by these oscillations as if he had not expected them to be like that, and so could not understand them, which led him to establish the laws that governed them. This gaze, as problematic as it is productive, is what the theatre must provoke with its representations of the way people live together. It must make its audience feel astonishment, and this can be achieved by techniques that make the familiar seem strange.

## 45

Such techniques allow the theatre to utilize for its representations the methodology of the new social science, the materialist dialectic. In order to establish society's laws of motion, this methodology treats social situations as processes and seeks out their contradictory nature. It regards everything as existing only in so far as it changes, or in other words is in disunity with itself. This also applies to those feelings, opinions and attitudes of human beings in which the respective characteristics of their social life together are expressed.

## 46

Our own age, which is transforming nature in so many and such diverse ways,

takes particular pleasure in interpreting everything in such a way that we can intervene in it. There is a great deal to human beings, we say, so a great deal can be made out of them. They do not have to stay the way they are; they may be looked at not only as they are now, but also as they might be. We must not start from them, instead we must train our sights on them. This means, however, that I must not simply put myself in their place, but must place myself opposite to them, representing all of us. That is why the theatre must estrange what it shows.

## 47

In order to produce V-effects, the actors had to discard all the means they had learnt of getting the audience to empathize with the characters they play. Not aiming to put their audience into a trance, they must not put themselves into a trance either. Their muscles must remain relaxed, because *e.g.* a turn of the head with tautened neck muscles will ‘magically’ lead the spectators’ gaze and even their heads to turn with it, and this can only diminish any speculation or emotional response that this gesture may produce. Let the way they speak be free from preacherly droning and all those cadences that lull the spectators to sleep so that the meaning is lost. Even if they play someone possessed they must not give the impression of being possessed themselves; otherwise, how could the spectators find out what possesses the possessed?

## 48

At no point must the actor let himself be totally transformed into the character. The verdict: ‘he didn’t act Lear, he was Lear’,\* would be an annihilating blow to him. All he has to do is show his character, or rather not just simply experience it; this does not mean that if he is playing passionate people he himself must be cold. It is just that his feelings should not in principle be those of his character, so that the audience’s feelings do not in principle become those of the character either. The audience must have complete freedom in this respect.

\*Editor’s note: Brecht is referring to Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1605).

## 49

This principle – that the actor appears on stage in a double guise, as Laughton

and as Galileo, that the Laughton who is showing does not disappear in the Galileo who is shown, which has led to this type of acting being called ‘epic’ – ultimately just means that the actual, everyday process is no longer disguised – for Laughton is in fact there, standing on the stage and showing us how he imagines Galileo to be.\* Even as they were admiring him, the audience would not of course forget Laughton even if he attempted to totally transform himself, but then they would miss his own opinions and sensations, which would have been completely swallowed up by the character. He would have made the character’s opinions and sensations his own, so that in fact only a single version of them would emerge: he would then make this version ours. In order to prevent this impoverishment he must make the act of showing artistic. An illustration may help: we can find a gesture which expresses one half of his attitude – that of showing – if we make the actor smoke a cigar and imagine him putting it down each time he shows us some further typical behaviour of the character in the play. If we remove anything slapdash from the image and do not construe its casualness as carelessness, we shall have an actor before us who would certainly be able to leave us to our thoughts or to his.

\*Editor’s note: The American version of *Life of Galileo*, with Charles Laughton in the title role, was first performed at the Coronet Theatre in Beverley Hills in July 1947 (see [Plate 20](#)).

## 50

There needs to be yet another change in the way actors convey these representations, and it too makes the process more ‘everyday’. Just as the actors should not mislead the audience into thinking that it is not them on stage but the characters in the play, neither should they mislead the audience into thinking that the events taking place on stage have not been rehearsed but are happening for the first and only time. Schiller’s distinction, that the rhapsodist should treat an incident as being wholly in the past, while the actor treats it as wholly here and now,<sup>1</sup> is no longer valid in those terms. It must be absolutely apparent when actors perform that ‘even at the beginning and in the middle they know how it ends’ and must ‘thus absolutely maintain a calm freedom’. They tell the story of their character by vivid portrayal, knowing more than it does, and positing the ‘now’ and the ‘here’ not as a fiction made possible by the rules of the game but by separating them from yesterday and some other place, so that the tying-together of the events can be made visible.



## 51

This is particularly important in the portrayal of mass events or where the outside world is significantly changed, as in wars and revolutions. The spectators can then have the whole situation and the whole course of events laid before them. For instance, as they hear a woman speaking they can imagine her speaking differently, let us say in a few weeks' time, and other women speaking differently at this point in time but somewhere else. This would be possible if the actress were to perform as though the woman had lived through the entire epoch and now, from memory and based on her knowledge of what happened next, was recounting those utterances of hers that were important for this point in time, for what is important here is what became important. Estranging a person in this way, as 'this particular person' and 'this particular person at this particular moment', is only possible if the following illusions are not created: that the actor is identical with the character and the performance is the actual event.

## 52

Now we have had to give up yet another illusion: that everyone behaves like the character concerned. 'I am doing this' became 'I did this', and now 'he did this' must become 'he did this, and nothing else'. It is too great a simplification if we make the deeds fit the character and the character fit the deeds; the contradictions that are to be found in the deeds and character of real people cannot be displayed in this way. Society's laws of motion cannot be demonstrated by means of 'ideal cases', for 'impurity' (contradictoriness) is an essential part of motion and of the thing moved. It is only necessary – though this is absolutely necessary – that by and large something like experimental conditions are created, in other words that in each case a counter-experiment is conceivable. Ultimately this is a way of treating society as if it does what it does, as an experiment.

## 53

Even if empathy with the character can be used when rehearsing (something to be avoided in a performance), it may only be employed as one of a number of methods of observation. It is useful when rehearsing, for even though the contemporary theatre has employed it in an excessive manner, it has nonetheless

led to very refined characterization. But it is the crudest form of empathy if the actor simply asks: what would I be like if this or that were to happen to me? what would it look like if I were to say this and do that? – instead of asking: how have I heard somebody saying this and seen them doing that? thereby bringing together all sorts of material in order to construct a new character such as could enable the story to have taken place – and a good deal more. The unity of the character is in fact formed by the way in which its individual characteristics contradict one another.

54

Observation is a major constituent of acting. The actors observe their fellow human beings with all their nerves and muscles in an act of imitation that is at the same time a thought process. For mere imitation would at best bring out what had been observed, which is not enough because the original says what it has to say with too low a voice. To produce a character rather than a caricature, the actors look at people as though they were demonstrating to the actors what they are doing, in other words as though they were recommending the actors to reflect on what they are doing.

55

Without opinions and intentions one cannot represent anything. Without knowledge one can show nothing; but how is one to know what is worth knowing? If the actors do not wish to be apes or parrots, they must acquire the knowledge of the time on how people live together by fighting in the class struggle themselves. Some people may feel this to be degrading, because they take art, once the money side has been settled, to be ethereal; but humanity's highest decisions are in fact fought out on earth, not in the heavens; by being 'expressed', not by staying inside people's heads. Nobody can stand above the warring classes, for nobody can stand above humanity. Society cannot speak with one voice so long as it is split into warring classes. And so for art, being 'impartial' simply means: belonging to the 'ruling' party.

56

Thus the choice of standpoint is also a major constituent of acting, and it must be chosen outside the theatre. Like the transformation of nature, the transformation of society is an act of liberation, and the joys of liberation are what the theatre of

a scientific age should convey.

## 57

Let us move on by examining how, for instance, this standpoint affects the actors' interpretation of their roles. It is important here that they should not 'catch on' too quickly. Even if they discover at once the most natural cadences for their lines, the most comfortable way of delivering them, they still must not take the way they deliver them to be the most natural way, but must think twice and take their own general opinions into account, then consider other potential ways of delivering them, in short, adopt the attitude of surprise. This is not only to prevent them from 'fixing' a particular character prematurely, *i.e.* before they have registered all the other ways of delivering their lines, in particular the ways the other characters deliver theirs, so that the character then might need to be crammed full of afterthoughts, but also, and this is the main point, so that they can build into the character that element of 'not – but' on which so much depends if the audience, representing society, is to be able to view the incidents from the perspective of influencing them. Also, instead of simply assimilating what suits them and taking it to be 'human nature', all the actors must reach out in particular for what does not suit them and is not their speciality. And along with their lines they must commit to memory their initial reactions, reservations, criticisms, bewilderment, so that in the final version the latter are, for instance, not destroyed by being 'assimilated' but remain preserved and perceptible; for the audience must find the character and all the rest remarkable rather than comprehensible.

## 58

And each actor's learning process must be coordinated with the learning process of the other actors, the development of their character coordinated with the development of the other characters. For the smallest social unit is not 'the' human being, but two people. In life too we develop one another reciprocally.

## 59

Here we can learn something from our own theatres' bad habit of letting the dominant actor, the star, also 'steal the show' by having all the other actors at

their beck and call: making their character terrible or wise by forcing their partners to make theirs timorous or attentive *etc.* To secure this advantage for everybody and thereby benefit the plot, the actors should sometimes swap roles with their partners during rehearsal, so that the characters can get from one another what they need from one another. But it is also good for the actors to see their characters being copied, or even portrayed in different ways. If the character is played by a person of the opposite sex, the gender of the character will be brought out more clearly, if played by a comedian, whether tragically or comically, new aspects will accrue to it. Above all, by helping to develop their counterparts or at any rate standing in for their performers, the actors secure the crucial social standpoint from which they present their character. The master is only the sort of master his servant lets him be, *etc.*

## 60

Innumerable operations to develop the character have already been carried out by the time it joins the other characters in the play, and the actors will have to memorize the presumptions they have derived from the text in relation to this. But now they find out much more about themselves from the way in which they are treated by the other characters in the play.

## 61

The domain of the attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the gestic domain. Posture, tone of voice and facial expression are determined by a social gestus: the characters curse, compliment, instruct one another, *etc.* The attitudes that people adopt towards one another include even those attitudes that would appear to be quite private, such as expressions of physical pain during illness, or of religious faith. These gestic expressions are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word, and the actors must take care that they lose nothing in the necessary reinforcement of the representation, and instead reinforce the entire complex.

## 62

The actors take control of their character by paying critical attention to its manifold expressions, as well as those of their counterparts and all the other characters in the play.

Let us get down to the issue of gestic content by running through the opening scenes of a fairly recent play, my own *Life of Galileo*.\* Since we wish at the same time to find out what light the different expressions cast on one another, we will assume that it is not our first encounter with the play. It begins with the forty-six year old man performing his morning ablutions, interrupted by browsing in books and giving a lesson on the new solar system to a boy called Andrea Sarti. To play this, surely you have got to know that we shall be ending with the seventy-eight year old man having his supper, just after the very same pupil has left him for ever? At which point he is more terribly altered than this passage of time could possibly have brought about. He wolfs his food down with unrestrained greed, nothing else in his head, he has rid himself of his educational mission in a shameful manner as though it were a burden, he who once drank his morning milk without a care, greedy to teach the boy. But does he really drink it without a care? Isn't his pleasure in drinking and washing at one with the pleasure he takes in the new ideas? Don't forget: he thinks out of sensuality! Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I would advise you to portray it as a good thing, since on this point you will find nothing in the entire play that is detrimental to society, and more especially because you yourself are, I hope, a brave child of the scientific age. But you must be clear about one thing, many horrible things will happen in this business. One aspect of this is the fact that the man who here welcomes the new age will be forced at the end to call on this age to disown him as contemptible, to dispossess him even. As for the lesson, you may also wish to decide whether the man's heart is so full that his mouth is overflowing, so that he would talk to anybody about it, even a child, or whether the child must first coax the knowledge out of him, by knowing him and showing interest. Again, there may be two of them who cannot restrain themselves, the one from asking, the other from answering; a fraternal bond of this sort would be interesting, for one day it will be rudely broken. You will of course want the demonstration of the earth's rotation round the sun to be conducted quickly, since it is not being paid for, and now the wealthy unknown pupil appears, making the scholar's time worth its weight in gold. He shows no interest, but he has to be served, Galileo is penniless after all, and so he will stand between the wealthy pupil and the intelligent one and sigh as he makes his choice. There is little that he can teach his new pupil, so he lets himself be taught by him; he hears about the telescope, which has been invented in Holland: in his own way he gets something out of the disturbance of his morning's work. The university rector arrives. Galileo's

request for an increase in salary has been turned down, the university is reluctant to pay the same for the theories of physics as it does for those of theology, it wishes him, who after all is working in a low status research area, to produce something useful here and now. You will see from the way in which he offers his treatise that he is used to being refused and reprimanded. The rector reminds him that the Republic guarantees freedom of research, even if it is badly paid; he replies that he cannot do much with this freedom if he lacks the leisure which good payment permits. Here you should not find his impatience too peremptory, or his poverty will not be given due weight. For shortly after that you find him having ideas that need some explanation: the prophet of a new age of scientific truth is working out how he can swindle some money out of the Republic by offering it the telescope as his own invention. All he can see in the new invention, you will be astonished to see, is a few scudi, and he is only examining it in order to get hold of them. But if you move on to the second scene, you will discover that while he is selling the invention to the Venetian city authorities with a speech that disgraces him with its lies, he has already almost forgotten the money, because he has worked out that the instrument has not only military but also astronomical significance. The product that he has been blackmailed – let us not mince words here – into making proves to have great qualities for the very research that he had to interrupt in order to make it. When during the ceremony, as he is flattered to accept the undeserved honours paid him, he outlines the marvellous discoveries to his learned friend – don't gloss over the theatricality with which he does this – you will encounter in him a far more profound excitement than the prospect of monetary gain aroused in him. Even if, looked at in this way, his charlatany does not mean much, it still shows how determined this man is to take the easy way out, and to apply his reason in a base as well as a noble manner. A more significant test awaits him, and does not every capitulation make the next one easier?

\*Editor's note: Brecht's discussion is based on the American version of *Life of Galileo*, translated by Charles Laughton, not the better known 1956 version; see *Galileo* in the Appendix to Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, Methuen Collected Plays, 5i, pp. 201–65.

## 64

In displaying such gestic material, the actors take control of their character by taking control of the 'plot'. Only on the basis of the plot, the clearly demarcated

complete event, are they able, as it were with a single leap, to arrive at the final version of their character, which subsumes all its individual features. Once they have done all they can to let themselves be amazed by the contradictions in its various attitudes, knowing that they will also have to make them amaze the audience, then the plot as a whole gives them the opportunity to splice the contradictory elements; for the plot, being a delimited event, produces a specific meaning, *i.e.* it gratifies only a specific set of many possible interests.

## 65

Everything depends on the 'plot', it is the core of the theatrical performance. For what happens *between* people provides them with everything that can be discussed, criticized, changed. Even if the particular person presented by the actor ultimately has to fit into more than just the event that is taking place, it is mainly because the event will be all the more striking if it involves a particular person. The 'plot' is the theatre's great undertaking, the complete composition of all the gestic incidents, containing the communications and motivations that from now on must constitute the audience's enjoyment.

## 66

Each individual event has its basic *gestus*: *Richard Gloster woos his victim's widow. The child's true mother is found by means of a chalk circle. God has a bet with the Devil for Dr Faust's soul. Woyzeck buys a cheap knife to kill his wife, etc.\** The grouping of the characters on the stage and the movement of the groups must be such that the necessary beauty is attained above all by the elegance with which the gestic material is presented and exposed to the insight of the audience.

\*Editor's note: The plays referred to are Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* (1592); Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, published together with the *Short Organon in Sinn und Form* (1949); Goethe, *Faust* (Part I 1808, Part II 1832); Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck* (1837). *Woyzeck* was not published until forty years after Büchner's death as *Wozzeck* (1877) and had a major impact on modern German drama from Naturalism via Expressionism to Brecht, who in 1928 described it as 'technically almost perfect' ('Productive Obstacles'/'Die produktiven Hindernisse', BFA 21, p. 255).

## 67

As the audience is not of course being invited to plunge into the plot as if it were a river, so as to drift indecisively hither and thither, the individual events have to be tied together in such a way that the knots become conspicuous. The events must not succeed one another imperceptibly, on the contrary we must be able to interpose our judgement. (If it were specifically the obscurity of the causal interrelations that interested us, then precisely this circumstance would have to be sufficiently estranged.) The component parts of the plot therefore have to be carefully set off against each other by giving them their own structure, that of a play within the play. To this end it is best to agree to use titles like those in the previous section. The titles must contain the social point at issue and at the same time say something about the preferred kind of portrayal, *i.e.* depending on the situation they should copy the tone of a chronicle or a ballad or a newspaper or a play of manners. A simple type of *Verfremdung*, for example, is the one normally applied to customs and social mores. A visit, the treatment of an enemy, a lovers' meeting, agreements about politics or business, can be presented as if one were simply portraying a custom prevalent in these places. If portrayed in this way, the unique and particular incident acquires a strange look, because it appears as something general, something that has become customary. Simply asking the question whether the incident, or part of it, should in fact become customary, is sufficient to estrange it. The poetic approach to history can be studied in the so-called panoramas in fairground stalls. As *Verfremdung* also means making something famous, certain incidents can simply be portrayed like famous ones, as though they had been common knowledge for a long while down to their very details, and as though one were trying hard not to prevent them from being handed down. In short: there are many conceivable kinds of storytelling, some well-known and some still to be invented.

## 68

What needs to be estranged and how this is to be done depends on the way in which the complete event is to be expounded, in which context the theatre may stand up robustly for the interests of its own age. In order to exemplify the process of exposition let us take the old play *Hamlet*.\* In view of the dark and bloody period in which I am writing, criminal ruling classes, widespread doubt in the power of reason, which is continually being misused, I think that I can analyse its plot as follows: it is a warlike age. Hamlet's father, the king of



Denmark, has slain the king of Norway in a victorious war of plunder. While the latter's son Fortinbras is arming for a new war, the Danish king is slain as well, by his own brother. The brothers of the slain kings, now kings themselves, avert war by permitting Norwegian troops to cross Danish territory to launch a predatory war against Poland. But at this point, the young Hamlet is summoned by his warrior father's ghost to avenge the atrocity committed against him. After showing some reluctance to answer one bloody deed with another, and even being prepared to go into exile, he meets young Fortinbras at the coast, who is marching with his troops to Poland. Overcome by this warlike example he turns back, and in a piece of barbaric butchery slaughters his uncle, his mother and himself, leaving Denmark to the Norwegian. As these events unfold, we see this young person, already somewhat stout, making quite inadequate use of the new kind of reason which he has picked up at the University of Wittenberg. In terms of the feudal affairs to which he returns, it simply hampers him. Faced with irrational practices, his reason is utterly impractical. He falls a tragic victim to the contradiction between such reasoning and such deeds. This way of reading the play, which can be read in more than one way, could in my view interest our audience.

\*Editor's note: Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1600).

## 69

Each step forward, every emancipation from nature in the field of production, leading to a transformation of society, all those attempts to move in some new direction that humanity has undertaken in order to improve its lot, no matter whether the literature of the ages presents them as successes or failures, all these give us a sense of triumph and confidence and enable us to take pleasure in the possibilities of change in all things. Galileo expresses this when he says: 'It is my opinion that the earth is most noble and admirable by reason of so many and so different alterations and generations which are incessantly made therein.'\*

\*Editor's note: This quotation from Galileo Galilei may be found on the first page of the *American Galileo*.

## 70

Expounding the plot and getting it across with suitable means of *Verfremdung* constitutes the main business of the theatre. And the actors do not actually have to do everything, even though nothing may be done without taking them into account. The 'plot' is expounded, developed and presented by the theatre as a whole, by the actors, stage designers, mask-makers, costumiers, musicians and choreographers. They all unite their various arts for the common undertaking, without of course sacrificing their independence in the process.

## 71

The musical addresses to the audience in the songs emphasize the general gestus of showing, which always accompanies the particular thing being shown. This is why the actors should not 'glide into' song, but should clearly set it off from the rest of the performance, and this is best reinforced by theatrical methods adopted for this purpose such as changing the lighting or inserting a title. For its part, the music must strongly resist the 'synchronization'\* which is generally expected of it, and which degrades it into an unthinking handmaiden. Do not let music 'accompany', except as custom dictates. Do not let it make do with 'expressing' itself simply by relieving itself of the mood which overwhelms it in response to the incidents in the play. Thus Eisler, for instance, dealt with the tying-together of the incidents in exemplary fashion when he set the carnival scene in *Galileo*, the masked procession of the guilds, to triumphant and ominous music indicating the rebellious twist that the lower orders had given to the scholar's astronomical theories. Similarly, in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* the horrors of an age in which motherliness can become a suicidal weakness are expressed by the way the singer uses a cold and unemotional style of singing to describe the servant-girl's rescue of the child while this is being mimed on the stage. Thus music can play its part in many ways and with complete independence, and can comment in its own manner on the themes dealt with, yet at the same time it can also simply lend variety to the entertainment.

\*Editor's note: Brecht uses the National Socialist term *Gleichschaltung*, a euphemism devised by the National Socialist regime to designate the process whereby it imposed totalitarian control on political, economic and social institutions in Germany from 1933 onwards. *Gleichschaltung* is also sometimes translated as alignment or coordination.

## 72

Just as the musicians win back their freedom by no longer having to create moods that make it easier for the audience to lose itself with abandon in the events on stage, so too the stage designers gain considerable freedom as soon as they no longer have to come up with the illusion of a room or a locality when building their sets. Hints are sufficient here, but they must make statements of greater historical or social interest than does the actual location. At the Jewish Theatre in Moscow, a structure reminiscent of a medieval tabernacle estranged *King Lear*; Neher set *Galileo* in front of projections of maps, documents and Renaissance works of art; for *Tai Yang Awakes* at the Piscator Theatre, Heartfield used a background of reversible banners bearing inscriptions, which indicated changes in the political situation that the people on the stage were sometimes unaware of.\*

\*Editor's note: *Tai Yang Awakes* was written by the Marxist dramatist Friedrich Wolf and produced by Piscator in January 1931 at the Wallner Theatre in Berlin, with John Heartfield as stage designer. The reversible banners were illustrated on one side with political slogans and statistical information, with the other side blank so that they could be used as projection screens.

## 73

For choreography too there are once again tasks of a realistic kind. It is a relatively recent error to suppose that choreography has nothing to do with the representation of 'people as they really are'. If art reflects life, then it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing proportions, but by changing them in such a way that if the audience used these representations as a practical guide to insights and motivations it would fail in real life. It is of course necessary that stylization should not abolish the natural element, but should heighten it. In any case, a theatre where everything depends on *gestus* cannot dispense with choreography. The mere elegance of a movement and gracefulness of a pose can produce *Verfremdung*, and inventive miming is of great help to the plot.

## 74

So let us invite all the sister arts of dramatic art to join us here, not in order to produce a *Gesamtkunstwerk*\* in which they all offer themselves up and

disappear, but instead, together with dramatic art, to further the common task in their different ways, and their dealings with one another consist in the fact that they mutually estrange one another.

\*Editor's note: See Brecht's critique of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* in 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*', [Part One](#).

## 75

And here, once again, let us recall that the task of dramatic art is to entertain the children of the scientific age, and to do so with sensuousness and humour. This is something that we Germans cannot tell ourselves too often, for with us everything very easily slides into the incorporeal and indistinct, at which point we begin to talk of a world view after the world itself has already dissolved. Even materialism is little more than an idea with us. With us, sexual pleasure turns into marital obligations, artistic pleasure is in the service of cultural education, and by learning we mean not a cheerful process of finding out, but having something shoved under our nose. Our activity has none of the cheerfulness of exploration, and when we give an account of ourselves we do not refer to how much fun we have got out of something but how much sweat it has cost us.

## 76

We still need to mention the delivery to the audience of what has been constructed in rehearsals. Here it is necessary that the gestus of handing over a finished product underlies the actual play. What now comes before the spectator is the most frequently repeated of that which has not been rejected, and so the finished representations must be delivered with full alertness, so that they may be received with alertness.

## 77

That is to say, the representations must take second place to what is represented, the way people live together, and the pleasure felt in their perfection must be transmuted into the higher pleasure felt when the rules that have emerged are

treated as provisional and imperfect in this life together. In this respect the theatre leaves its spectators productively disposed, going beyond mere looking. In their theatre may they enjoy as entertainment their terrible and never-ending labours – which are supposed to sustain them – together with the horror of their own incessant transformation. Let them here produce their own life with the greatest ease; for the greatest ease in living is in art.

[‘*Kleines Organon für das Theater*’, BFA 23/65-97]

First published in *Sinn und Form: Sonderheft Bertolt Brecht*, Potsdam, 1949.

### Appendices to the *Short Organon*

[The numbers refer to the relevant sections of the work.]

## §3

It is not just a matter of art presenting what needs to be learned in an enjoyable form. The contradiction between learning and enjoying oneself must be clearly grasped and its significance understood – in an age when knowledge is acquired in order to be sold on for the highest possible price, and when even a high price still involves further exploitation by those who pay it. Only once productivity has been set free can learning be transformed into enjoyment and enjoyment into learning.

### *On §4*

Even if we now abandon the concept of ‘epic theatre’, we are not abandoning the step towards conscious experience that epic theatre still makes possible. It is just that the concept is too meagre and too vague for the kind of theatre intended; it needs more precise definition and must achieve more. Besides, it was too inflexibly opposed to the concept of the dramatic, often just taking it for granted far too naively, roughly in the sense that ‘of course’ it always embraces incidents that take place directly with all or most of the hallmarks of immediacy. (In the same, not always innocuous way, we always take it naively for granted that whatever its innovations it is still theatre – and does not, as it were, turn into a scientific demonstration –!)

### *On §4*

Nor is the concept of the ‘theatre of the scientific age’ broad enough. The *Short*

*Organon for the Theatre* may present an adequate explanation of what the term scientific age can mean, but the term on its own, in the form in which it is commonly used, is much too sullied.

## 9

Artists cannot give pleasure to anybody without idealizing reality, whether positively or negatively; however, they can achieve that with completely false idealizations, *i.e.* those that are grounded in false ideas, so that the hints that are taken from the representations have no practical application to the reality represented, the motivations that are taken up [text breaks off].

## §12

Our enjoyment of old plays becomes greater the more we can indulge in the new kind of pleasures better suited to us. To that end we need to develop the historical sense – which we also need for the new plays – into a real sensual delight.<sup>2</sup>

### *On §19*

In times of upheaval, fearful and fruitful, the evenings of the doomed classes coincide with the dawns of those that are rising. It is in these twilight periods that the owl of Minerva sets out on its flights.\*

\*Editor's note: Minerva was the Roman goddess of war and wisdom, and the owl was sacred to her – Brecht is citing the final sentence of the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

### *On §45*

The theatre of the scientific age is able to make dialectics enjoyable. The surprises of logically progressive or erratic development, of the instability of all situations, the wit of contradictory circumstances etc., all these involve enjoyment of the liveliness of people, things and processes, and they heighten both the art of living and the joy of living.

All the arts contribute to the greatest art of all, the art of living.

### *On §53*

However dogmatic it may seem to warn that empathy with the character in the

play should be avoided during the performance, it is useful for our generation to pay heed to this warning. However resolutely they might follow this advice, they could hardly follow it to the letter, and that is how we are most likely to get to that truly rending contradiction between experience and portrayal, empathy and demonstration, justification and criticism, which is what is required. And thus to the leading role of critique.

## §53

The contradiction between acting (demonstration) and experience (empathy) often leads the uninstructed to suppose that only the one or the other can be manifest in the work of the actor (or that the *Short Organon* deals only with acting and the old tradition only with experience). In reality we are of course dealing with two mutually hostile processes that are combined in the actors' work (their performances do not just contain a bit of the one and a bit of the other). The actors derive their true effectiveness from the tussle and tension of the two opposites, and also from their depth. The misunderstanding is due in part to the way in which the *Short Organon* is written. The latter is often misleading thanks to a possibly over-impatient and over-exclusive concern with the 'principal side of the contradiction'.<sup>3</sup>

### On §55

And yet art addresses all alike, and would confront the tiger with its song. And it's not unusual for him to let us sing along with him! It's not unusual for new ideas, whose fruitfulness is evident irrespective of who would reap the fruits from them, to be brought to the 'top' by the rising classes and find their way into the sensibilities of those who really ought to be rejecting them in order to preserve their own advantages. For the members of a given class are not immune to ideas that are of no benefit to their class. Just as the members of oppressed classes can succumb to the ideas of their oppressors, so members of the oppressor class can succumb to the ideas of the oppressed. In certain periods the classes struggle for the leadership of humanity, and those who are not completely depraved feel a powerful urge to be counted among its pioneers and to progress. It wasn't just poison that lured the Versailles court into applauding Figaro.\*

\*Editor's note: Brecht is referring to Caron de Beaumarchais's comedy *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784), which he saw as a key text in the development

of middle-class realist drama. (See 'Notes on the Realist Mode of Writing', *Brecht on Art and Politics*, p. 253)

### **Additional Appendices to the *Short Organon***

The *plot* does not just correspond to an episode from people's lives together as it might have taken place in reality, instead we have rearranged incidents in which the plot inventor articulates ideas about people's lives together. In the same way the characters are not simply depictions of living people, but are rearranged and shaped in accordance with ideas.

These rearranged incidents and characters in many ways contradict the knowledge that the actors have gained from experience and books, and the actors must take note of this contradiction and maintain it in their performance. They must draw simultaneously on reality and on literature, for as in the work of the playwright so too in their work reality must appear rich and topical in order to bring out in a palpable way the specific or general features of literature.

\*

Studying a part is simultaneously studying the plot, or rather, initially it must mainly involve studying the plot. (What happens to these people? How do they take it? What do they do? What opinions do they come in contact with? Etc.)



## Nachtrag zum Kleinen Organon

Die FABEL entspricht nicht einfach einem Ablauf aus dem Zusammenleben der Menschen, wie er sich in der Wirklichkeit abgespielt haben könnte, sondern es sind surechtgemachte Vorgänge, in denen die Ideen des Fabelerfinders über das Zusammenleben der Menschen zum Ausdruck kommen. So sind die Figuren nicht einfach Abbilder lebender <sup>menschlicher</sup> oder denkbarer Leute, sondern surechtgemacht und nach Ideen geformt.

Zu den surechtgemachten Vorgängen und Figuren befindet sich das Wissen der Schauspieler aus <sup>und nach innen</sup> ihrer Erfahrung in Widerspruch und diesen Widerspruch müssen sie feststellen und <sup>beim Spiel</sup> aufrechterhalten. Sie müssen zugleich aus der Wirklichkeit und aus der Dichtung schöpfen, denn wie in der Arbeit der Dichter <sup>haben sie</sup> muss in ihrer Arbeit die Wirklichkeit reich und aktual vorkommen, damit das Besondere oder Allgemeine <sup>(oder die Wirkung) wahrnehmbar</sup> herausgeholt wird; ~~xxxx~~

**Figure 7** Facsimile of a page from the appendices to the *Short Organon*.

To this end the actors need to muster their knowledge of the world and the people in it, and moreover they must ask their questions dialectically. (Certain questions are only asked by dialecticians.)

For instance: an actor is to play Faust. Faust's love affair with Gretchen runs a fateful course. This leads to the question: would that not happen if Faust married Gretchen? Usually people do not ask this question. It seems too trite, vulgar, petty bourgeois. Faust is a genius, a great mind striving after the infinite; how can anyone dream of asking the question 'Why doesn't he get married?' But ordinary people do ask this question. That in itself must lead the actor to ask it too. And once he has reflected on the matter the actor will realize that this question is a very necessary and very fruitful question.

It is of course necessary to establish first of all under what conditions this love story takes place, its relation to the plot as a whole, what it signifies for the main idea. Faust has abandoned his 'lofty', abstract, 'purely intellectual' attempts to find pleasure in life, and now turns to 'purely sensual' earthly experiences. His relationship with Gretchen thereby becomes a fateful one, *i.e.* he thereby comes into conflict with Gretchen, his sense of union is torn asunder, his pleasure turns into pain. The conflict leads to Gretchen's utter destruction, and Faust is hard hit by this. However, this conflict can only be portrayed correctly in relation to another far greater conflict that dominates the entire work, both Part I and Part II. Faust has managed to escape from the painful contradiction between his 'purely intellectual' escapades and his unsatisfied and insatiable 'purely sensual' appetites, and this with the help of the Devil. In the 'purely sensual' sphere (of the love story) Faust comes up against his environment, represented by Gretchen, and has to destroy her in order to save himself. The resolution of the main contradiction comes about at the end of the whole play and only at that point clarifies the significance and relative position of the lesser contradictions. Faust has to relinquish the parasitic attitude of a mere consumer. Intellectual and sensual activity is united in productive work for humanity, and the production of life leads to pleasure in life.

Turning back to our love story, we can see that marriage, no matter how petty-bourgeois, would have been out of the question for a genius and in contradiction with his whole career, yet in a relative sense would have been better and more productive as this would be the temporal union that would have enabled the woman he loved to develop instead of being destroyed. Faust would, however, hardly be Faust in that case, being bogged down (as suddenly becomes clear) in pettiness etc., *etc.*

The actor who pluckily asks the ordinary people's question will be able to make Faust's non-marriage into a clearly defined stage in his development, whereas otherwise, which is what usually happens, he merely helps to show that whoever wishes to rise higher must invariably create pain on earth, that the need to pay for pleasures and personal development is the unresolvable tragedy of life – in other words, the most brutal and most petty bourgeois truism that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.\*

\*Editor's note: Brecht's discussion relates to the Berliner Ensemble's production of Goethe's *Urfaust* in 1953, directed by Egon Monk. The *Urfaust* was drafted in 1774 and is the earliest version of Goethe's masterpiece. See also 'Two Notes about *Urfaust*' in [Part Three](#).

\*

The bourgeois theatre's performances always aim at glossing over contradictions, at the pretence of harmony, at idealization. Conditions are depicted as if they simply could not be otherwise; characters as individuals, incapable by definition of being divided, cast 'in one block', as proving themselves in a variety of situations, yet actually existing even in the absence of any situation. Where development does take place, it is always continual, never erratic, and the developments always take place within a quite specific framework that can never be blown apart.

None of this corresponds to reality and so must be given up by a realistic theatre.

\*

Genuine, profound, interventionist utilization of *Verfremdung* effects assumes that society considers its condition to be historical and capable of improvement. Genuine V-effects have a combative character.

\*

To develop a genuine plot it is most important that initially the scenes are simply played in sequence, using experiences from real life, but without taking much account of the scenes that follow or even of the play's overall meaning. The plot will then unfold in a contradictory manner, the individual scenes retain their own meaning, yielding (and drawing on) a wealth of ideas, and the sum total, the plot, will unfold authentically in twists and turns, without that trite, all-pervading idealization (one word leading to another) or bringing subordinate, purely functional component parts into line with an entirely conciliatory conclusion.

\*

Let us cite *Lenin*: 'The precondition for knowledge of all occurrences in the world in their "self-movement", in their spontaneous development, in their vitality of being, is knowledge of them as a unity of opposites.'<sup>4</sup>

It is a matter of complete indifference whether the theatre's main aim is to provide knowledge of the world. The fact remains that the theatre has to represent the world and these representations must not be misleading. If Lenin's assertion is right, then such representations cannot turn out satisfactorily without knowledge of dialectics – and without making us aware of dialectics.

Objection: What about the kind of art that gets its effects from dark, distorted, fragmentary representations? What about the art of savages, lunatics and children?

If one knows a great deal and can retain what one knows, it may be possible to benefit even from representations such as these, but we suspect that unduly subjective representations of the world have anti-social effects.

\*

The assumption that in the case of our new art learning is a pleasure no doubt derives from the fact that as proletarians we were kept away from learning for such a long time so that we should remain proletarians, in other words it derives from the fact that learning is a prerequisite for and a consequence of the victory of our class, and that as brainworkers we have been prevented from thinking beyond the ruling state of affairs, namely capitalism.

\*

Several literary historians construed the titles preceding each scene in *Mother Courage* and the songs in the *Chalk Circle* as no more than prompts which the audience would soon become sick and tired of. They are no more prompts than are the choruses in classical plays. In so far as they contain announcements, [text breaks off].

### **Defence of the *Short Organon***

The somewhat cooler acting style has been seen as weakening the impact of theatre, and this has been connected to the decline of the bourgeois class. Hearty fare is demanded for the proletariat, that ‘full-blooded’ drama that immediately grabs you, where opposites crash into one another etc., etc.\* Though when I was young, the poor people in the suburb where I grew up took salted herring to be a square meal.

\*Editor’s note: This text relates to Fritz Erpenbeck’s orthodox Marxist critiques of the *Short Organon* and the East Berlin production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* in January 1949. Erpenbeck was an advocate of traditional dramatic form, and he and his acolytes advocated the ‘full-blooded’ drama that Brecht rejects. See also *Brecht on Art and Politics: Introduction to Part Five* and Brecht’s essays on formalism (pp. 309–16).

[‘*Nachträge zum “Kleinen Organon”*’, BFA 23/289-95]

After Brecht’s death some twenty sheets of notes were found among his papers, headed ‘Appendix to the *Short Organon*’ or – in the case of §3 – ‘Appendix to the *New Organon*’. According to Käthe Rüllicke, he drafted

the Appendices at her instigation in 1954, so as to clarify his dramaturgical practices. The 'Appendices' are numbered and cross-referenced to specific sections of the *Short Organon*. The 'Additional Appendices' are not numbered and are printed in the sequence adopted in the Berlin/Frankfurt edition. None of these appendices were published in Brecht's lifetime. The first of the 'Additional Appendices' (Figure 7, p. 259) is particularly important as it clarifies Brecht's understanding of *Fabel*, or plot. He draws on the distinction between 'plot' and 'story', whereby the story corresponds to the way in which the narrated events occur in everyday life, and the plot restructures them for strategic purposes. In epic theatre, the 'dramatic action' is structured on the basis of montage rather than straightforward linear flow, and is interrupted by direct address to the audience in songs, choruses and projections. An excellent example of chronological disruption may be found in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, where the action of the *Caucasian* framework play is set in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the action of the *Chalk Circle* play involves a double flashback to a feudal society, in that the linear time frame for scenes 2 through 4 is duplicated in scene 5, and both strands then merge in scene 6. Brecht's understanding of plot is similar to Aristotle's in the *Poetics*. In Brecht's copy of the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines plot as 'die Verknüpfung der Begebenheiten', the linking – or tying-together – of the incidents, and Brecht adopts Aristotle's terminology in section 5 of his Preface to the *Antigone Model 1948* (see *Brecht on Performance*; BFA 25, p. 79). In the *Short Organon*, Brecht deploys the metaphor of tying-together in a more literal sense, suggesting that events have to be 'tied together in such a way that the knots become conspicuous' (§67).

## Theatre Work

### **Friedrich Wolf–Bert Brecht: Formal Problems Arising from the Theatre's New Content**

#### *A Dialogue*

*Friedrich Wolf*: Dear Bert Brecht! In the world of the theatre you and I have long been aiming at the same goal, although from differing standpoints as playwrights. The great and well-deserved success of your *Mother Courage* has

made it essential to provide present-day theatregoers with a general discussion of your approach to play-writing. Obviously it was no accident that you called *Mother Courage* a 'chronicle', which I presume is a variety of your 'epic theatre'. Is this conscious use of the chronicle form meant to re-emphasize that your first concern is to let the facts, the naked facts, speak to the audience? Including, in Aristotle's sense, historically possible facts? Or to put it crudely: objective theatre rather than psychological theatre, even though people are often not influenced by the facts?

*Bertolt Brecht:* The chronicle play *Mother Courage and her Children* – with the term 'chronicle' corresponding roughly to that of 'history' in Elizabethan drama – does not of course represent any kind of attempt to persuade anybody of anything by setting forth naked facts. Facts can very seldom be caught without their clothes on, and, as you rightly say, they are hardly seductive. It is, however, necessary that chronicles should include a factual element, that is, they should be realistic. Nor does the distinction 'objective theatre rather than psychological theatre' help us much, as it is also possible to produce objective psychological theatre, if we take primarily psychological 'material' as the main subject for artistic representation, while at the same time aiming to be objective. As for the chronicle in question, I don't believe that it leaves the audience in a state of objectivity (that is, dispassionately balancing pros and cons). I believe rather or let's say I hope – that it makes them critical.

*Friedrich Wolf:* Your theatre appeals in the first place to the spectator's powers of understanding. You want to set out by arousing the audience to a clear recognition of the relationships in actual and possible situations (social conditions), and so to lead it to correct conclusions and decisions. Are you unwilling to address yourself in the same way directly to the feelings and emotions – to the sense of justice, the urge to freedom, the 'sacred wrath' against the oppressor? I am deliberately putting the question simply: in this spirit, and purely to clarify matters, do you think it better not to offer present-day audiences such a historical chronicle as [Goethe's] *Götz von Berlichingen* (whose character likewise scarcely undergoes any development, conversion or 'catharsis', but which appeals above all to an emotional experience)? Do you feel that the Hitler period with its avalanche of perverted emotions has so discredited such works that we have come to treat them as *a priori* suspicious?

*Bertolt Brecht:* It is not true – although it is sometimes suggested – that epic theatre, which is not simply undramatic theatre – as is also sometimes suggested – proclaims the slogan: 'Reason this side, Emotion (feeling) that.' It by no means renounces emotions, least of all the sense of justice, the urge to freedom and righteous anger; it is so far from renouncing these that it does not even

assume their presence, but tries to arouse or to reinforce them. The ‘critical attitude’ that it tries to awaken in its audience cannot be passionate enough for it.

*Friedrich Wolf:* You use your projected subtitles (*The Threepenny Opera, Courage*) before the individual scenes to explain the plot to the audience in advance (see [Figure 8](#)). You are thus deliberately renouncing the ‘dramatic’ elements of ‘tension’ and ‘surprise’. In the same way you renounce the emotional experience. Do you want first at all costs to arouse the spectator’s powers of understanding? Does this mean that there is a conscious theatrical sequence: understanding without plot and tension, actor and adversary, development and conversion of the characters? How does your school of playwriting analyse the almost thriller-like elements of dramatic tension in *Hamlet*, in *Othello*, in Schiller’s *Intrigue and Love* (exposition – ‘tying the knot’; development – startling solution)?

*Bertolt Brecht:* It is impossible to explain in a few words how this type of theatre creates tension and surprise. The old pattern ‘exposition – tying the knot – startling solution’ is already disregarded in histories like [Shakespeare’s] *King John* or [Goethe’s] *Götz von Berlichingen*. Of course the characters undergo development and conversion, although not necessarily an ‘inner conversion’ or a ‘development to the point of understanding’. That would in many cases be unrealistic; and in my view a materialist representation involves letting the characters’ consciousness be determined by their social existence and not manipulating it for dramatic ends.



**Figure 8** A screen with 'Bavaria' and a projection on the half-curtain from Brecht's staging of *Mother Courage and Her Children* at the Berliner Ensemble, 1949.

*Friedrich Wolf*: It is precisely in *Courage* – where in my view you implement the epic style most consistently – that the audience's reactions showed the story's points of maximum emotion to be the highlights of the performance (dumb Kattrin's signal on the drum, and the whole of that scene; the death of the eldest son; the mother's scene where she curses the war). And now for my real question, arising from the *content* (which even for you has to determine the form of this marvellously wrought performance): once she has realized that war doesn't pay, once she has lost not only her belongings but also her children, mustn't this *Mother Courage* finish up – history being what is possible – an entirely different person from what she was at the beginning of the play? Particularly for our present German public, who even after the time ran out were always justifying themselves with: 'What could we do about it? War's war. Orders are orders. The cart must roll on.' (See [Plates 23](#) and [24](#)) – My dear Brecht, it is precisely this splendid performance and production, this persuasively good production, that brings me to a fundamental question, fundamental even from your own point of view. Both of us are trying to use the medium of the stage to advance and transform humanity; the final objective is human transformation on the stage and in the spectator's consciousness. Now you may say: I use my art to represent conditions just as objectively and forcefully as they are in real life, and so I force the spectators themselves to decide between good and evil. You, Wolf, start by putting your finger on the sore point even on the stage; you transfer the decision to the stage, and this is too painful a method for the present day audience to hear. You, an adherent of homoeopathy in medicine, approach the stage like a surgeon; my own way is the opposite one: the audience doesn't notice its treatment, so swallows the medicine. True enough. And yet I do wish you would give us an equally brilliant production of your admirable *St Joan of the Stockyards*; how the pack would howl if you did!

But of course it is useless trying to doctor around with a work of art. With the theatre in a state of Babylonian confusion my questions are simply designed to further our common aim: How can our German theatres show our people what is most urgent? Specifically: how can we shake them out of their fatalistic attitude and arouse them against a new war? And in this sense I think *Courage* would have been even *more* effective if at the end the mother had given her curse on the war some visible expression in the action (as Kattrin did) and drawn the



logical conclusions from her change of mind. (I might add that the same Thirty Years' War saw peasants banding together and defending themselves against the marauding soldiers.)

Dear Brecht, that your play triggered such discussions proves its quality and necessity. I hope that our discussion as well will not limit itself to the interesting problem of form and instead illuminate the content, the one inseparable from the other.

*Bertolt Brecht:* As you quite rightly say, the play in question shows that Courage has learnt nothing from the disasters that befall her. The play was written in 1938, when the writer foresaw a great war; he was not convinced that humanity in the abstract was going to learn anything from the tragedy that he expected to strike it. My dear Friedrich Wolf, you will surely be the first to admit that the playwright was being a realist about this. But even if Courage learns nothing else, at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her.

I quite agree with you that the question of choice of artistic means can only be that of how we playwrights give a social stimulus to our audience (get them moving). To this end we should try out every conceivable artistic method, whether it is old or new.

And so: let's work together actively!

In lasting comradeship, yours  
Bertolt Brecht

Berlin, 25 January 1949

[*'Friedrich Wolf – Bert Brecht: Formprobleme des Theaters aus neuem Inhalt. Ein Zwiegespräch'*, BFA 23/109-13]

Brecht noted after the Berlin premiere of *Mother Courage and Her Children* on 11 January 1949 that playwright Friedrich Wolf and critic Fritz Erpenbeck were especially critical of his dramaturgical approach. Friedrich Wolf (1888–1953) was a well-known communist playwright of a more conventional sort, spent his exile years in Moscow and returned to Germany where he became a leading cultural functionary in East Germany. His criticism of *Mother Courage* was symptomatic of a widely held view that Brecht's plays were not 'positive' enough and relevant to current problems. Apparently Wolf sent Brecht the written questions and then published them together with the written responses in the January 1949 issue of the journal *Volk und Kunst* (the monthly bulletin of the federation of German

*Volksbühnen* or workers' theatres).

### **From a Letter to an Actor**

I have been brought to realize that many of my remarks about the theatre are misunderstood. I realize this above all from those letters and articles that agree with me. I then feel as a mathematician would if he read: Dear Sir, I am wholly of your opinion that two and two make five. I think that certain remarks are misunderstood because there were important points that I took for granted instead of defining.

Most of the remarks, if not all, were written as notes to my plays, to allow them to be correctly performed. That gives them a rather dry and practical form, as if a sculptor were writing matter-of-fact instructions about the placing of his work: where it should go and on what sort of a base. Those addressed might have expected something about the spirit in which the work was created. They would find it difficult to get that from the instructions.

For instance, the description of virtuosity. Art of course cannot survive without artistry, and it becomes important to describe 'how it is done'. Especially when the arts have undergone a decade and a half of barbarism, as they have here. But it should not for a moment be thought that this is something to be 'coolly' learned and practised. Not even speech training, which is something that the bulk of actors badly need, can be done coolly, in a mechanical way.

Thus actors must be able to speak clearly, and this is not just a matter of vowels and consonants but also (and primarily) a matter of the meaning. Unless they learn at the same time how to bring out the meaning of their lines, they will simply be articulating like a machine and destroying the sense with a 'beautiful speaking voice'. And within clarity there are all kinds of degrees and distinctions. Different social classes have different kinds of clarity: a peasant may speak clearly in comparison with a second peasant, but his clarity will not be the same as that of an engineer. This means that actors learning to speak must always take care to see that their voice is pliant and flexible. They must never lose sight of the way people really talk.

There is also the problem of dialect. Here again technique needs to be linked up with more general considerations. Our theatrical language is based on High German, but over the years it has grown very mannered and stilted, and has developed into a quite special sort of High German that is no longer as flexible as High German everyday speech. There is nothing against the use of 'heightened' language on the stage, that is to say, against the theatre's evolving

its own stage language. But it must always be lively, varied and capable of further evolution. The people speaks dialect. Dialect is the medium of its most intimate expression. How can our actors portray the people and address it unless they go back to their own dialect, and allow its inflections to permeate the High German of the stage?

Another example. Actors must learn how to economize their voice: they must not grow hoarse. But they must also be able to portray a person seized by passion who is speaking or shouting hoarsely. So exercises must include an element of acting.

We shall get empty, superficial, formalistic, mechanical acting if in our technical training we forget for a moment that it is the actor's duty to portray living people.

This brings me to your question whether acting is not turned into something purely technical and more or less inhuman by my insistence that the actor ought not to be completely transformed into the character portrayed but should, as it were, stand alongside it criticizing and approving. In my view this is not the case. Such an impression must be due to my way of writing, which takes too much for granted. To hell with my way of writing. Of course the stage of a realistic theatre must be peopled by live, three-dimensional, self-contradictory people, with all their passions, unconsidered utterances and actions. The stage is not a hothouse or a zoological museum full of stuffed animals. The actor has to be able to create such people (and if you could attend our productions you would see them; and they succeed in being people because of our principles, not in spite of them!).

There is, however, a complete fusion of the actor with the role that leads to making the character seem so natural, so impossible to conceive any other way, that the audience has to accept it simply as it stands, with the result that a completely sterile atmosphere is engendered of 'understanding all is forgiving all', as happened most notably under Naturalism.

We who are concerned to change human as well as ordinary nature must find means of 'shedding light on' the people at that point where they seem capable of being changed by society's intervention. This means a quite new attitude on the part of the actors, for their art has hitherto been based on the assumption that people are what they are, and will remain so whatever it may cost society or themselves: 'universally human', 'by nature so and not otherwise' and so on. Actors need to decide their attitude to the scene and the character both emotionally and intellectually. The change demanded of the actors is not a cold and mechanical operation: art has nothing cold or mechanical about it, and this change is an artistic one. It cannot take place unless they have real contact with

the new audience and a passionate concern for human progress.

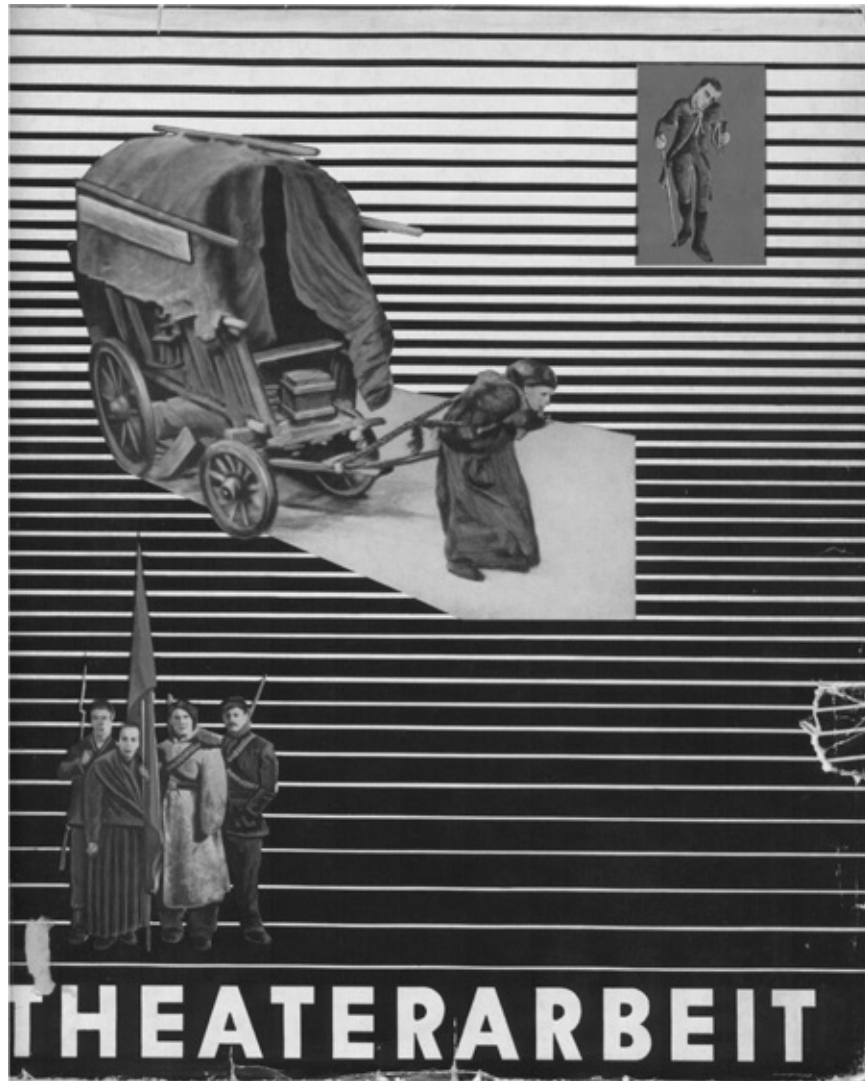
So our theatre's *corresponding stage groupings* are not just an effect or a 'purely aesthetic' phenomenon, conducive to formal beauty. They are a part of a theatre of grand subjects for the new social order, and they cannot be achieved without deep understanding and passionate support of the new structure of human relations.

I cannot rewrite all the notes to my plays. Please take these lines as a provisional appendix to them, in attempt to make up for what had been wrongly assumed.

That leaves me with one thing still to explain: the relatively quiet style of acting that sometimes strikes visitors to the Berliner Ensemble. This has nothing to do with forced objectivity, for the actors adopt an attitude to their parts; and nothing to do with mock-rationalism, for reason never flings itself coolly into the battle; it is simply due to the fact that plays are no longer subjected to red-hot 'temperamental' acting. True art is stimulated by its material. On those occasions when the recipient thinks he is observing coldness, it is just that he has encountered the mastery without which it would not be art at all.

[*'Aus einem Brief an einen Schauspieler'*, BFA 23/171-4]

Written in 1951. The letter was composed for *Theaterarbeit* and not addressed to a particular actor. This is perhaps the most important of Brecht's modifications of his extreme theoretical position. The doctrines laid down in the *Short Organon* were by all accounts neither discussed nor put into practice in the Berliner Ensemble under Brecht's leadership. Many of the actors claimed that they never read his theoretical writings, nor did Brecht ask them to do so.



**Figure 9a** The book cover of *Theaterarbeit*, 1952 (front).

### **What Makes an Actor**

Now and then the question arises ‘what makes an actor,’ this strange animal that, illuminated by the spotlights, in front of a silent audience sitting in the dark, pretends with all his artistry to be a king or a beggar. The usual answer is that this animal has the powerful urge to display itself in front of all the people. Passion, drive and deep sensibility in this undertaking, it is said, make the true actor. I do not share this view. In my opinion the true actor both wishes and is able to display *other* people, to perform for the audience people who are completely different than himself, and it is the wish and ability to observe people that make the true actor.

[‘Was einen Schauspieler ausmacht’, BFA 23/186]

Typescript, written around 1951.



**Figure 9b** The book cover of *Theaterarbeit*, 1952 (back).

## Gesture

Whenever we discuss *gesture*, we should first disregard *pantomime* because it is a separate branch of the expressive arts, like acting, opera and dance. In *pantomime* everything is expressed without language – even speaking. But we are concerned with *gesture*, which appears in everyday life and is shaped in acting.

Then there are individual *gestures* that are made in lieu of statements and that

we understand through tradition, such as the affirmative head-nod (for us). Illustrative gestures that describe the size of a cucumber or the curve of a racing car. Next, the variety of gestures that demonstrate emotional states, such as contempt, tenseness, helplessness and so on.

Furthermore, we also speak of a *gestus*. By this we mean the entire complex of diverse, individual gestures, combined with utterances, that forms the basis of a discrete human incident and relates to the overall attitude of all those taking part in the incident (people condemning others, giving guidance, fighting and so on); or by this we mean a complex of gestures and utterances that triggers certain incidents when one individual displays them (*Hamlet's* wavering attitude, or *Galileo's* confession and so on), or simply a basic human attitude (like being contented or waiting). A *gestus* traces how humans relate to one another. The work process is not an example of a *gestus* unless it also shows a social relationship such as exploitation or cooperation.

[‘*Gestik*’, BFA 23/187-8]

Typescript, written around 1951 (see [Plate 21](#)).

## **Kurt Palm**

Kurt Palm's costumes are among the works of art I would place in a theatre museum. No photograph can fully convey their beauty; they share this fate with sculptures.

All of Palm's costumes are historical costumes, even the contemporary ones. For past eras his thorough knowledge of costume design guides him; for the present day he depends on his feeling for what is typical.

His knowledge does not constrain his imagination. His sense of taste chooses freely from among the products of a past era.

Palm knows that historical fidelity is not enough to evoke the spirit of an era. Here too, a selection and an idealization have to take place – a typification. You cannot do this based purely on aesthetic perspectives; you also need a political point of view. What class represented progress in the France of the Sun King, which class realized it, which one paid for it? What role did clothing play? How did people move in their clothes? You have to be able to ‘tell something’ from looking at a man's coat. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, for example, a professor in a northern Italian city could not afford to buy many suit coats during his entire life; therefore they had to last and so on.

Bringing social distinctions to light is a difficult task for the costume designer. The audience, who cannot be assumed to have knowledge of the historical

period, must *perceive* the distinctions. Often the lackey appears more magnificent (richer!) than the duke. Palm is indefatigable in creating distinguishing marks of a social nature.

Period style on stage is only the general framework; much depends on what is particular, namely the plot and meaning of the play. For Lenz's *Hofmeister* [*The Tutor*] you can recreate the style of the period, but then there is still the Baroness von Berg. Of course she ranks above the tutor Läufer socially but in addition – and this is very important – she has a very particular character, she is overbearing, stingy, loves music, has a 'French-style education' and is misunderstood. So she will dress in a very particular way. Therefore the costume designer must be able to create confidently within the overall style of the period. Palm can do that.

The plot of the play has both characters and events that the costume designer must take into account. Gorchakov recounts what Stanislavsky asked the set designer to do during the rehearsals for *The Gerard Sisters* – the set should not just create a general environment; it must create the best possible opportunity to make a very particular event effective (in this case the event was the initiation of a young girl into an orgy). This challenge also applies to the costume designer. In *Mother Courage and Her Children* Courage's bold son is led to his execution because of an armed robbery. Palm has the boy dressed in rags and barefoot at the beginning. Now he arrives in expensive black armour (black like the SS uniform): he has been enriching himself during his entire military career ...

A set designer of Palm's calibre intervenes in a major way in the director's work, he helps shape the groupings and movements, he is even involved in casting.

By no means does he simply deliver costumes to the actor based on impersonal designs and leave him to see how he manages with that. He does not just fit the costumes. For him, the actor's body and the way he holds himself and moves is a rich source of inspiration for the costume. Narrow shoulders, a very straight back, thick calves – he will 'bring out' all of that. And in addition he helps the actor construct the role!

If he is given the opportunity to do so, Palm helps determine the style of the performance. Simply through his choice of fabrics (felt, silk, burlap and so on) he ensures the unity of the image, always progressing according to the concept of the play. His knowledge of fabrics is comprehensive, and he constantly invents new procedures for handling them.

And at the same time this master succeeds in unobtrusively giving his costumes his own personal style, his forceful, delicate signature.



[‘Kurt Palm’, BFA 23/210-2]

Written in 1952. Kurt Palm was the director of the costume shop at the German State Opera in East Berlin but had designed the costumes for *Mother Courage and Her Children* as well as *The Tutor* at the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht’s comments about his extraordinary talents contributed to the bestowing of the National Prize in October of the same year. Nikolai Gorchakov described the difficulties he had during the production of the play *The Gerard Sisters* and Stanislavsky’s intervention.

## Two Notes about *Urfaust* (1952)

### *About Our Stagings*

I do not approve of creative processes that are secretive and deep. A role can be individually developed but not to the extent that it becomes permanently fixed. Most of the work happens in ensemble practice. After that everything must change once again. A role can only be constructed in such a way that the director can reintegrate it.

We work out situations, and the plot has the final say. We construct the plot, not characters that are then thrown into the plot.

1. The actor sees something particular and becomes interested in the role in this way,
2. if the actor notices certain things, he will find new perspectives if he has already studied the character.

I believe working up roles individually has no disadvantages in our approach to acting.

*Urfaust* is written in a cabaret style. It has ‘sketches’ that can be separated out. *Urfaust* is truly an epic play. For example, the scene with the pupils or with Wagner can be treated as self-contained units. This way the actor gets something out of it, he does not just deliver cues.

[‘Über unsere Inszenierungen’, BFA 23/192]

### *The Plot*

The magic must first be exposed and then of course recreated. It is necessary to know that when, for example, the skeleton appears, there is more to it than just that. Flesh and organs have already been cut away, but the skeleton on its own

has no life. We come to a kind of profane anatomy or bone structure; but that is not the end of it.

Whenever I critically analyse a work, I throw it into crisis; I criticize it. That means it must prove itself in response to the most difficult circumstances and the most inartistic questions – it has to show that it is a work of art. The work must survive all that. The work can be thrown into several types of crises. For it exists neither because of nor for the crises; it just exists. Crisis is by no means the purpose of the work.

I change a work fundamentally, which means I go to its very foundation. However, the foundation is not the point. I have the work appear before me in its many changes in order to reach its full magnitude. The magnitude emerges in its variability, or rather in its service to varied interests that are antithetical to one another.

[*Die Fabel*, BFA 23/192-3]

Typescripts, both dated 2 January 1952. The preparations for rehearsals of Goethe's first Faust text (*Urfaust*, 1773–5) began under Brecht's supervision in February 1952, opening on 23 April 1952 in the Brandenburg State Theatre in Potsdam under the direction of Egon Monk with sets by Hainer Hill. Before and during the rehearsals, Brecht asked that reports be written for him on a regular basis. According to his assistant Käthe Rüllicke, these two notes were dictations formulated and authorized by Brecht. The second one carries her following notation: 'The reason for Brecht's comment was a suggestion by Rüllicke that for young people or those who do not know Brecht it is dangerous to hear his analyses. The reduction of the plot to such a bare summary of the essence appears to them like a simplification that loses its grandeur and seems simplistic.'

### **Classical Status as an Intimidating Factor**

There are many obstacles to the lively performance of our classics. The worst are the theatrical hacks with their reluctance to think or feel. There is a traditional style of performance that is automatically counted as part of our cultural heritage, although it only harms the true heritage, the work itself; it is really a tradition of damaging the classics. The old masterpieces become, as it were, dustier and dustier with neglect, and the copyists more or less conscientiously include the dust in their replica. What gets lost above all is the classics' original freshness, the element of surprise (in terms of their period), of newness, of productive stimulus that is the hallmark of such works. The traditional way of

playing them suits the convenience of producers, actors and audience alike. The passionate quality of a great masterpiece is replaced by stage temperament, and where the classics are full of fighting spirit, here the lessons taught the audience are tame and cosy and fail to grip. This leads of course to a ghastly boredom, which is likewise quite alien to the classics. Actors and producers, many of them talented, set out to remedy this by thinking up new and hitherto unknown, sensational effects, which are, however, of a purely formalist kind: that is to say, they are forcibly imposed on the work, on its content and on its message, so that even worse damage results than with traditional-style productions, for in this case message and content are not merely dulled or flattened out but absolutely distorted. Formalist 'renewal' of the classics is the answer to stuffy tradition, and it is the wrong one. It is as if a piece of meat had gone bad and were only made palatable by saucing and spicing it up.

Before undertaking to produce one of the classics, we must be aware of all this. We have to see the work afresh; we cannot go on looking at it in the depraved, routine-bound way common to the theatre of a depraved bourgeoisie. Nor can we aim at purely formal and superficial 'innovations' that are foreign to the work. We must bring out the ideas originally contained in it; we must grasp its national and its international significance, and to this end we must study the historical situation prevailing when it was written, also the classical author's attitude and special peculiarities. Such study poses its own problems, which have often been discussed and will be discussed much more. I shall not go into that for the moment, as I want to speak about a further obstacle that I call intimidation by classical status.

Intimidation of this sort is due to a superficial and mistaken conception of a work's classical status. The greatness of the classics lies in their human greatness, not in a surface 'greatness' (in quotes). The tradition of performance long 'cultivated' at the court theatres has moved further and further away from this human greatness in the theatres of a declining and degenerate bourgeoisie, and the formalists' experiments have only made things worse. The true pathos of the great bourgeois humanists gave way to the false pathos of the Hohenzollerns; the ideal to idealization; winged sublimity to hamming, ceremony to unctuousness and so forth. The result was a false greatness that was merely flat. Goethe's marvellous sense of humour in *Urfaust* was out of keeping with the stately Olympian strides expected of classic authors – as though humour and true dignity were opposites! His brilliantly conceived actions were treated only as a step to effective declamation; in other words they were entirely neglected. The falsifying and trivializing process went so far that, to take another instance from *Urfaust*, such essential incidents in the play as the great humanist's pact with the

Devil – which is after all significant for Gretchen’s tragedy, for without it this would take a different form or not occur at all – are simply ‘thrown away’, presumably in the conviction that a hero can only behave heroically in a classical play. It is true that *Faust* and even *Urfaust* can only be produced with the purified and converted Faust of the end of [Part Two](#) in mind, the Faust who beats the Devil and moves on from an unproductive enjoyment of life (as provided by the Devil) to productive enjoyment. But what is left of this magnificent transformation if the first stages are skipped? If we allow ourselves to be intimidated by a fake, superficial, decadent, petty bourgeois idea of what constitutes a classic, then we shall never achieve lively and human performances of the great works. The genuine respect demanded by these works entails that we expose any respect of a false, hypocritical, lip-serving kind.

[‘*Einschüchterung durch die Klassizität*’, BFA 23/316-8]

Typescript, probably written in 1954. Egon Monk’s *Urfaust* production in Potsdam, under Brecht’s supervision (see previous note), opened in Berlin on 3 March 1953 for several performances (with some roles newly cast) at the Kammerspiele, intended to contrast with Wolfgang Langhoff’s *Faust* production at the Deutsches Theater next door. The official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* published a harsh critique on 28 May 1953. Meanwhile, in mid-May a controversy began around Hanns Eisler’s unfinished *Johannes Faustus* opera, which Brecht had encouraged him to undertake as a response to the anti-formalism campaign in 1952. The larger context for this brief note was Brecht’s concern about revitalizing the classical repertoire, thus leading to the adaptations he staged at the Berliner Ensemble including Lenz’s *Der Hofmeister* (*The Tutor*), Kleist’s *Der zerbrochene Krug* (*The Broken Jug*), Molière’s *Don Juan* and Farquhar’s *Pauken und Trompeten* (*The Recruiting Officer*).

## On Stanislavsky

### Some of the Things That Can Be Learnt from Stanislavsky

1. The sense for a play’s poetry.

Even when Stanislavsky’s theatre had to put on naturalistic plays to satisfy the taste of the time, the production endowed them with poetic features; it never deteriorated into flat reporting of facts. Here in Germany even the classic plays

are often dull!

2. The sense of responsibility to society.

Stanislavsky taught actors the social meaning of performing in the theatre. Art was not an end in itself, but he knew that theatre serves no purpose except through art.

3. The stars' ensemble playing.

Stanislavsky's theatre consisted only of stars, great and small. He proved that individual playing only reaches full effectiveness by means of ensemble playing.

4. Importance of the line of action and detail.

In the Moscow Art Theatre every play acquired a carefully thought out shape and a wealth of subtly elaborated detail. The one is useless without the other.

5. The obligation to the truth.

Stanislavsky taught that actors must be thoroughly familiar with themselves and the people they want to portray, and that one results from the other. Nothing that is not taken from an actor's observation, or confirmed by observation, is fit to be observed by the audience.

6. The harmony of naturalness and style.

Beautiful naturalness is paired with profundity in Stanislavsky's theatre. As a realist he never hesitated to portray ugliness, but he did so gracefully.

7. Representation of reality as full of contradictions.

Stanislavsky grasped the diversity and complexity of social life and knew how to represent them without getting entangled. All his productions make sense.

8. The importance of human beings.

Stanislavsky was a convinced humanist, and as such conducted his theatre along the road to socialism.

9. The significance of art's further development. The Moscow Arts Theatre never rested on its laurels. Stanislavsky invented new artistic methods for every production. From his theatre came such important artists as Vakhtangov, who in turn developed their teacher's art further in complete freedom.

[*'Was unter anderem vom Theater Stanislavskis gelernt werden kann'*, BFA  
23/167-8]

Written in 1951, first published in *Theaterarbeit* in 1952. Major theatre critics and cultural functionaries in East Germany considered Brecht's stagings at the Berliner Ensemble to be out of step with the sanctioned developments in the Soviet Union, that is, Stanislavsky's psychological realism in the theatre. This text is a first attempt on Brecht's part to summarize what they have in common, although points 1 through 8 do not

characterize the salient features of Stanislavsky's method. The last of the nine points signals an appeal to move away from Stanislavsky with its mention of his student Evgeny Vakhtangov, who was also influenced by Vsevolod Meyerhold's theatre experiments in the early 1920s.

## On Stanislavsky

Stanislavsky's core is realistic. Brecht opposes him when auto-suggestion, conditions of trance-like states, occurs. In the working rehearsal reports this does not occur at all.

Without talent Stanislavsky's method is madness. It is not a method that enables untalented actors to act in the theatre; it enables those who possess talent. It must be applied with creativity. Right away talent will develop 'the method', in other words, abandon it.

Stanislavsky's superb observation described in the rehearsal description in *Theater der Zeit*. This is not his method; it is his talent. His way of working includes observation; this is good.

Boredom is shown by starting many things and finishing nothing – not by doing nothing. But then Stanislavsky stops. He does not question why this is so. We would have to try to bring out why this is the attitude of social parasites, and show the societal background.

Assigning numbers to voice intensity is good, presumes a great theatre culture. Many practical things that are very helpful. We must pay attention to the dialectic, to eliciting the dialectic, to the social aspect. Something like 'Verfremdung' is unknown to Stanislavsky. But what he does with this orgy is the method of *Verfremdung* (do not cling to concepts but to practical work methods). The lighting and curtaining off of the orgy are V-effects. To discover: not just an orgy, specifically the orgy of the aristocracy at that time. A superb observation: even at the orgy the ladies and gentlemen behave as parasites. They do not exert themselves, not even for pleasure, they have pacesetters. We should not proceed by means of the superstructure – the theory – but rather via the practical work of the rehearsal. In practice a realistic acting style is intended, and without reality nothing can come of it. Stanislavsky shows a genuine development from naturalism to realism.

[*'Zu Stanislavski'*, BFA 23/224-5]

Typescript, written in February 1953. Brecht revised and authorized the protocol by Käthe Rüllicke of a discussion about Stanislavsky stimulated by an article published in the East German journal *Theater der Zeit* (1/1953).

The reference to assigning numbers for voice intensity refers to the famous mass scene of the guests in Act 3 of *Woe from Wit* (A. S. Griboyedov), and the orgy refers to a scene in *The Gerard Sisters* (V. Masse) at the Moscow Art Theatre.

### **Stanislavsky Studies [3]**

1. Before you assimilate a character in the play, or lose yourself in it, there is a first phase: you become familiar with the character and do not understand it. This is in the reading and in the early rehearsals; there you search intently for contradictions, for deviations from the typical, for the ugly in the beautiful, for the beautiful in the ugly. In the first phase your most important gesture is shaking your head, you shake your head like a tree so that its fruits fall to the ground where they can be gathered.

2. The second phase is that of empathy, of the search for the truth of the character in the subjective sense, you let the character do what *it* wants, how it wants, criticisms be damned, society should only pay for what is needed. – But it is not a matter of diving in head first. You let your character react to the other characters, the surrounding, the specific plot in the easiest, that is, the most natural way. This gathering continues slowly until you dive, until you jump into the final form of the character, becoming one with it.

3. And then comes a third phase in which you try to see the character that you now ‘are’ from the outside, from society’s standpoint; and you must recall the mistrust and admiration you felt in the first phase. And after this third phase, that of accountability to society, you deliver your character to society.

4. Perhaps we must also add that during working rehearsals not everything goes smoothly according to the above scheme; the development of the character happens irregularly; the phases often overlap; while some parts will have already attained the third phase, others will still face difficulty in the second or even first phase.

[‘*Stanislavski-Studien [3]*’, BFA 23/227-8]

Typescript, written in March/April 1953. Excerpts from Stanislavsky’s book *An Actor’s Work* (1938) appeared in German in several issues of *Theater der Zeit* during 1953 (in book form not until 1955). The first excerpts probably led Brecht to write these notes.

### **A Few Thoughts on the Stanislavsky Conference**

Occasionally our conferences are still somewhat unsuccessfully organized. At the theatre conference and the Stanislavsky conference some time ago the keynote lecture was not made available beforehand; these were not even distributed, and the participants had to improvise everything – which is very bad for such an important topic. Because I am especially weak at improvising, I will offer my contribution here.

Even a quick study of Stanislavsky's way of working reveals a great wealth of exercises and techniques that are useful for realistic representation. There is much to learn here, but it must be real learning. I am not sure whether the useful presentation of my friend Langhoff, which, itself not without clever self-criticism, did not actually incite some confusion by trying to present a few of Stanislavsky's main principles using his own staging of *Egmont*. He described the meaning of Goethe's poetics, assuming correctly that according to Stanislavsky the full realization of meaning is the main task of the director – Stanislavsky calls this the 'through line' as I understand it.<sup>5</sup> It did not seem to me to go far enough. However, as he began to talk about implementing the substance of the meaning through acting on stage, I got the impression that at times he lapsed into simple idealism, that is, he merely shifted the task of 'embodying' the poet's ideas on to the stage. The elevation of reality happened in such a way that certain characters were idealized. This is of course no longer realism.

Langhoff spoke about the character of Vansen, which he portrayed as positive. Initially he saw him as a rebel, a man hunted and in tattered clothing, who was occasionally forced to hide in hay lofts. Now, thinking about the play's through line of action, he decided to dress him in neat, light-coloured clothing – 'After all, the resistance fighters during Nazism, in order to go unnoticed, always tried to be decently dressed.' I would say to this: the symbolism of brightening is totally lost on me, and the original conception is in no way concerned with Naturalism because evidence of persecution does not belong to the realm of chance, the unimportant, the socially insignificant. Conversely, I like the reminder of the resistance fighters, and the realistic solution would be therefore to choose clothing that indicates hardship and at the same time the man's attempt to keep it clean. I believe Stanislavsky, who proceeded very subtly and never idealized, would have also decided this way.

Even we Germans, whose theatre oscillates between uninspired Naturalism and pure idealism, can learn much from Stanislavsky.

Perhaps it is only my own ignorance, but I do not agree with Langhoff in the matter of the physical actions either. In my opinion it cannot be about how the regent expresses her nervousness or Egmont his fear of death (through these or



other movements). And here Stanislavsky seems to proceed with more depth and more *materialistically*. In my assessment it is a matter of how the private inner life or this and that quality of the characters can be made noticeable by external action (rushing back-and-forth – an expression, by the way, of the fear of death that comes precariously close to cliché). Moreover, the characters' emotions should also be subordinated to the play's plot, which is not directly dependent on them or triggered by it.

At a rehearsal of *The Days of the Turbins*, as reported by Vasili Toporkov, Stanislavsky intervened when a young officer, wounded in the battle at the barricades, was brought in and the family began to express their pain. Stanislavsky, who hated it when actors only squeezed out the plot in order to arrive at outbursts of emotion, and who mistrusted this kind of emotion, demanded that a place be found in the room for the wounded man, bandages be brought and the *fact be acknowledged that the counter-revolutionary officer had to be hidden*: this was an episode in the civil war!

Studying descriptions of Stanislavsky rehearsals seems to be especially fruitful. His conceptions are often admirable, the executions almost always astounding. I choose the word 'astounding' because his theatrical thoughts, his 'ideas' always have an element of the unexpected. For that he can thank his brilliant sense of theatrical effect. It seems to me that he loves to play off the way things really are, against our shallow notions of them; they achieve something surprising because they contrast with theatrical clichés. It may not be possible to simply imitate this but it does set a standard. For Stanislavsky, realism is combative because it is revolutionary and destroys false images that are in circulation (that have been placed in circulation) and replaces them with correct ones.

Langhoff's conception of Goethe's *Egmont* appears idealistic and non-dialectical to me too. In his Saturday presentation *Egmont* is at the least the untarnished champion of a war of liberation. Because I hear that Vallentin spoke about this, I will say nothing more about it, although the Stanislavsky model must be carefully considered precisely in respect to the 'through line': it is pretty much the main point.<sup>6</sup>

If I interpret Stanislavsky correctly, the most beautiful and deepest formulation of the 'through line' remains, of course, dry and pedantic in the theatre if a full, lively, contradictory image of reality is not achieved there. Stanislavsky's legacy is full of tips and thoughts, exercises and procedures that facilitate this task.

Let us clarify, refine and complete our own by studying the great innovator of the theatre: Stanislavsky!

[‘*Einige Gedanken zur Stanislawski-Konferenz*’, BFA 23/236-9]

Typescript, written in April 1953. Brecht refers to the First German Theatre Congress held in January 1953 (under the focus themes: The Soviet theatre is our model and Socialist Realism on German stages) and he participated in the second day of the Stanislavsky conference (19 April 1953) when, according to Käthe Rüllicke, he made an improvised speech about ‘Similarities and Differences between Stanislavsky and Brecht’. This text may be a version of that speech written after the conference and meant for publication. Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Day of the Turbins* was produced by Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1926, with Toporkov playing one of the brothers; Toporkov also wrote a book about Stanislavsky that was published in German in 1952. Maxim Vallentin was the manager of the East Berlin Maxim Gorky Theater and considered to be a dogmatic Stanislavskian.

## Dialectical Theatre

### From Epic to Dialectical Theatre 2

#### 1

In other writings we have treated the theatre as a collective of storytellers who have come together to embody certain stories, that is, to lend their persons to them or create settings for them.

#### 2

We have also described what these storytellers are trying to achieve: to provide the audience the pleasure of critically, that is, productively, observing human behaviour and its consequences.

With this mind-set there is no longer any reason for the sharp division of genres – unless such a reason is found. The events take on a tragic or comic aspect as appropriate; their tragic or comic side is brought into the foreground. This has little to do with the comic scenes that Shakespeare scattered throughout

his tragedies (and later Goethe in his *Faust*). The serious scenes themselves can take on a comic aspect (like the scene in which Lear gives away his kingdom). To be more precise, in such cases the comic aspect in the tragic or the tragic aspect in the comic emerges forcefully as a contrast. (In this respect the difference that has sometimes been made between comedy and tragedy therefore no longer applies.)

### 3

So that the particularity of situations and behaviour that the theatre presents may emerge and be criticized in a playful manner, the audience creates in its mind additional situations and ways of behaving, and, while still following the plot, compares them to what the theatre presents. In this way the audience itself is transformed into a storyteller.

### 4

If we keep this in mind and emphatically add that the audience, as co-inventor, must be able to take the standpoint of the part of society that is the most productive, most impatient and most insistent on positive change, we may from now on stop using the term *epic theatre* for the theatre that we mean. This term has proven its usefulness if the narrative element that is part of all theatre has been strengthened and enriched.

This is not a step backwards. Rather, through strengthening the narrative element of all theatre, both past and present, a foundation has now been established for the unique features of a new type of theatre, new at least in the sense that it *consciously* develops characteristics of previous theatre – the dialectical ones – and makes them pleasurable. Given these unique features, the term *epic theatre* seems entirely general and indefinite, almost formalistic.

### 5

We will now go further, turning to the light we must cast on the events among people that we wish to portray so that the changeability of the world becomes visible and gives us pleasure.

### 6

In order to be able to see the changeability of the world, we have to take note of its laws of development. In doing so, our point of departure is the dialectics of the socialist classics.

## 7

The changeability of the world stands on its contradictoriness. In things, people and events there is something that makes them the way they are and simultaneously something that makes them different. They develop, do not remain the same, change to the point of unrecognizability. And things as they are right now, as such 'unrecognizable', contain within themselves something other, earlier, hostile to the present.

[*'Vom epischen zum dialektischen Theater 2'*, BFA 23/300-1]

Typescript, written around 1954. The earlier writings referred to in number 1 is the *Short Organon*. Following the last sentence of number 4, Brecht had added in brackets and then crossed out the following passage: 'It could be used for productions of Claudel's or even Wilder's works! Epic theatre could be made to prove the "absurdity" of the "earthly"! And there is Hellenistic and Asian theatre, which is epic and different from ours.' The socialist classics in number 6 refer to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

### **Dialectics in the Theatre**

The works that follow relate to paragraph 45 of the *Short Organon for the Theatre* and suggest that the term 'epic theatre' is too formal for the kind of theatre intended (and to some extent practised). Epic theatre is a prerequisite for these contributions, but it does not of itself imply that productivity and mutability of society from which they derive their main element of pleasure. The term must therefore be declared inadequate, although no new one can be put forward.

### **Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare's Coriolanus**

B. How does the play begin?

R. A group of plebeians has armed itself with a view to killing the patrician Caius Marcius, an enemy to the people, who is opposed to lowering the price of corn. They say that the plebeians' misery is the patricians' well-being.

B.?

R. Have I left something out?

B. Are Marcius's services mentioned?

R. And disputed.

P. So you think the plebeians aren't all that united? Yet they loudly proclaim their determination.

W. Too loudly. If you proclaim your determination as loudly as that, it means that you are or were undecided, and very much so.

P. In the usual theatre this determination always has something comic about it: it makes the plebeians seem ridiculous, particularly as their weapons are inadequate: clubs, staves. Then they collapse right away, just because the patrician Agrippa makes a fine speech.

B. Not in Shakespeare.

P. But in the bourgeois theatre.

B. Indeed yes.

R. This is awkward. You cast doubt on the plebeians' determination, yet you bar the comic element. Yet you think after all that they won't let themselves be taken in by the patrician's demagogy. So as not to seem comic in this way too?

B. If they let themselves be taken in, I wouldn't find them comic but tragic. That would be a possible scene, *for such things happen*, but a horrifying one. I don't think you realize how hard it is for the oppressed to become united. Their misery unites them – once they recognize who has caused it. 'Our misery is their well-being.' But otherwise their misery is liable to cut them off from one another, for they are forced to snatch the wretched crumbs from each other's mouths. Think how reluctantly people decide to revolt! It's an adventure for them: new paths have to be marked out and followed; moreover the rule of the rulers is always accompanied by that of their ideas. To the masses, revolt is the unnatural rather than the natural thing, and however bad the situation from which only revolt can free them, they find the idea of it as exhausting as the scientist finds a new view of the universe. This being so, it is often the more intelligent people who are opposed to unity, and only the most intelligent of all are for it.

R. So really the plebeians have not become united at all?

B. On the contrary. Even the Second Citizen joins in. Only neither we nor the audience must be allowed to overlook the contradictions that are bridged over, suppressed, ruled out, now that sheer hunger makes a conflict with the patricians unavoidable.

R. I don't think you can find that in the text, just like that.

B. Quite right. You have got to have read the whole play. You can't begin without having looked at the end. Later in the play this unity of the plebeians

will be broken up, so it is best not to take it for granted at the start, but to show it as having come about.

W. How?

B. We'll discuss that. I don't know. For the moment we are doing an analysis. Go on.

R. The next thing that happens is that the patrician Agrippa enters, and proves with a parable that the plebeians cannot do without the rule of the patricians.

B. You say 'proves' as if it were in quotes?

R. The parable doesn't convince me.

B. It's a world-famous parable. Oughtn't you to be objective?

R. Yes.

B. Right.

W. The man starts off by suggesting that the high prices have been set by the gods, not the patricians!

P. That was a valid argument in those days, in Rome I mean. Don't the interests of a given work demand that we respect the ideology of a given period?

B. You needn't go into that here. Shakespeare gives the plebeians good arguments to answer back with. And they strongly reject the parable, for that matter.

R. The plebeians complain about the price of corn, the rate of usury, and are against the burden of the war, or at any rate its unjust division.

B. You're reading that into it.

R. I can't find anything against war.

B. There isn't.

R. Marcius comes on and berates the armed plebeians, whom he would like to see abused with the sword, not with speeches. Agrippa plays the diplomat and says that the plebeians want corn at their own rates. Marcius jeers at them. They don't know what they are talking about, having no access to the Capitol and therefore no insight into the state's affairs. He gets angry at the suggestion that there's grain enough.

P. Speaking as a military man, presumably.

W. In any case as soon as war breaks out, he points to the Volscians' corn.

R. During his outburst Marcius announces that the Senate has now granted the plebeians People's Tribunes, and Agrippa finds this strange. Enter Senators, with the officiating Consul Cominius at their head. Marcius is delighted at the idea of fighting the Volscians' leader Aufidius. He is put under Cominius's command.

B. Is he agreeable to that?

R. Yes. But it seems to take the Senators slightly by surprise.

B. Differences of opinion between Marcius and the Senate?

R. Not important ones.

B. We've read the play to the end, though. Marcius is an awkward man.

W. It's interesting, this contempt for the plebeians combined with high regard for a national enemy, the patrician Aufidius. He's very class-conscious.

B. Forgotten something?

R. Yes. Sicinius and Brutus, the new People's Tribunes, came with the Senators.

B. No doubt you forgot them because they got no welcome or greeting.

R. Altogether the plebeians get very little further attention. A senator tells them sharply to go home. Marcius 'humorously' suggests that they should rather follow him to the Capitol. He treats them as rats, and that is when he refers them to the corn of the Volscians. Then it just says, 'Citizens steal away.'

P. The play makes their revolt come at an unfortunate moment. In the crisis following the enemy's approach the patricians can seize the reins once more.

B. And the granting of People's Tribunes?

P. Was not really necessary.

R. Left behind on their own, the Tribunes hope that the war, instead of leading to Marcius's promotion, will devour him, or make him fall out with the Senate.

P. The end of the scene is a little unsatisfactory.

B. In Shakespeare, you mean?

R. Possibly.

B. We'll note that sense of discomfort. But Shakespeare presumably thinks that war weakens the plebeians' position, and that seems to me splendidly realistic.

B. Lovely stuff.

R. The wealth of events in a single short scene. Compare today's plays, with their poverty of content!

P. How the 'exposition' at the same time gives a rousing send-off to the plot!

R. The language in which the parable is told! The humour!

P. And the fact that it has no effect on the plebeians!

W. The plebeians' native wit! Exchanges like 'Agrippa: Will you undo yourselves? Citizen: We cannot, sir, we are undone already!'

R. The crystal clarity of Marcius's harangues! What an outsize character! And one who emerges as admirable while behaving in a way that I find beneath contempt!

B. And great and small conflicts all thrown on the scene at once: the unrest of the starving plebeians plus the war against their neighbours the Volscians; the plebeians' hatred for Marcius, the people's enemy – plus his patriotism; the

creation of the post of People's Tribune – plus Marcius's appointment to a leading role in the war. Well, how much of that do we see in the bourgeois theatre?

W. They usually use the whole scene for an exposition of Marcius's character: the hero. He's shown as a patriot, handicapped by selfish plebeians and a cowardly and weak-kneed Senate. Shakespeare, following Livy rather than Plutarch, has good reason for showing the Senate 'sad and confused by a double fear – fear of the people and fear of the enemy'. The bourgeois stage identifies itself with the patricians' cause, not the plebeians'. The plebeians are shown as comic and miserable types (rather than as humorous and suffering from misery), and Agrippa's remark labelling the Senate's granting of People's Tribunes as strange is used for the light it casts on Agrippa's character rather than for establishing a preliminary link between the advance of the Volscians and the concessions made to the plebeians. The plebeians' unrest is, of course, settled at once by the parable of the belly and the members, which is just right for the bourgeoisie's taste, considering the modern proletariat ...

R. Although in Shakespeare Agrippa certainly makes no claim to Marcius about the success of his speech to the plebeians, he only says that they lack the intelligence (to understand his speech) but not cowardice, an accusation, incidentally, that's impossible to understand.

B. We'll note that.

R. Why?

B. It gives rise to discomfort.

R. I must say, the way in which Shakespeare treats the plebeians and their tribunes rather encourages our theatre's habit of letting the aristocratic hero's complaints be aggravated as far as possible by the people's 'foolish' attitude, and thus paves the way for anticipatory forgiveness of the later excesses of his 'pride'.

B. All the same, in Shakespeare the patricians' corn profiteering does play a role as well as their inclination at the least to conscript the plebeians for war (Livy has the patricians say something to the effect that the base plebs always go astray in peacetime), also the plebeians' unjust indebtedness to the nobles. In such ways Shakespeare doesn't present the revolt as a piece of pure folly.

W. But Shakespeare doesn't do much to bring out Plutarch's interesting phrase: 'Once order had been restored in the city by these means, even the lower classes immediately flocked to the colours and showed the greatest willingness to let the ruling authorities employ them for the war.'

B. All right; if that's so, we'll read the phrase with all the more interest: we want to find out as much about the plebeians as we can.



P. 'For it may involve characteristics/Of famous ancestors.'

R. There's another point where Shakespeare refrains from coming down on the aristocratic side. Marcius isn't allowed to make anything of Plutarch's remark that 'The turbulent attitude of the base plebs did not go unobserved by the enemies. They launched an attack and put the country to fire and sword.'

B. Let's close our first analysis at this point. Here is roughly what takes place and what we must bring out in the theatre. The conflict between patricians and plebeians is (at least provisionally) set aside, and that between the Romans and the Volscians becomes predominant. The Romans, seeing their city in danger, legalize their differences by appointing plebeian commissars (People's Tribunes). The plebeians have got the Tribunate, but the people's enemy Marcius emerges, *qua* specialist, as the leader in war.

B. The brief analysis we did yesterday raises one or two very suggestive problems of production.

W. How can we show that there has been opposition to the plebeians uniting, for instance? Just by that questionable emphasis on determination?

R. When I told the story, I didn't mention their lack of unity because I took the Second Citizen's remarks as a provocation. He struck me as simply testing the First Citizen's determination. But I don't suppose it can be played in this way. It's more that he's still hesitating.

W. He could be given some reason for his lack of warlike spirit. He could be better dressed, more prosperous. When Agrippa makes his speech he could smile at the jokes, and so on. He could be disabled.

R. Weakness?

W. Morally speaking. The burnt child returns to its fire.

B. What about their weapons?

R. They've got to be poorly armed, or they could have got the Tribunate without the Volscians' attack; but they mustn't be weak, or they could never win the war for Marcius and the war against him.

B. Do they win their war against Marcius?

R. In our theatre, certainly.

P. They can go in rags, but does that mean they have to go raggedly?

B. What's the situation?

R. A sudden popular uprising.

B. So presumably their weapons are improvised ones, but they can be good improvisers. It's they who make the army's weapons; who else? They can have got themselves bayonets, butchers' knives on broom handles, clubs converted from fire irons and so on. Their inventiveness can arouse respect, and their

arrival can immediately seem threatening.

P. We're talking about the people all the time. What about the hero? He wasn't even the centre of R.'s summary of the content.

R. The first thing shown is a civil war. That's too interesting to be mere background preparation for the entrance of the hero. Am I supposed to start off: 'One fine morning Caius Marcius went for a stroll in his garden, went to the marketplace, met the people and quarrelled' and so on? What bothers me at the moment is how to show Agrippa's speech as both ineffective and having an effect.

W. I'm still bothered by P.'s question whether we oughtn't to examine the events with the hero in mind. I certainly think that before the hero's appearance we are entitled to show the field of forces within which he operates.

B. Shakespeare permits that. But haven't we perhaps overloaded it with particular tensions, so that it acquires a weight of its own?

P. And *Coriolanus* is written for us to enjoy the hero!

R. The play is written realistically, and includes sufficient material of a contradictory sort. Marcius fighting the people: that isn't just a plinth for his monument.

B. Judging from the way you've treated the story, it seems to me that you've insisted from the first on enjoying the pleasure to be had in the tragedy of a people that has a hero against it. Why not follow this inclination?

P. There may not be much pretext for that in Shakespeare.

B. I doubt it. But we don't have to do the play if we don't enjoy it.

P. Anyway, if we want to keep the hero as the centre of interest, we can also play Agrippa's speech as ineffective.

W. As Shakespeare makes it. The plebeians receive it with jeers, pityingly even.

R. Why does Agrippa mention their cowardice – the point I was supposed to note?

P. No evidence for it in Shakespeare.

B. Let me emphasize that no edition of Shakespeare has stage directions, apart from those presumed to have been added later.

P. What's the producer to do?

B. We've got to show Agrippa's (vain) attempt to use ideology, in a purely demagogic way, in order to bring about that union between plebeians and patricians that in reality is affected a little – but not very much – later by the outbreak of war. Their real union is due to *force majeure*, thanks to the military power of the Volscians. I've been considering one possibility: I'd suggest having Marcius and his armed men enter somewhat earlier than is indicated by

Agrippa's 'Hail, noble Marcius!' and the stage direction that was probably inserted because of this remark. The plebeians would then see the armed men looming up behind the speaker, and it would be perfectly reasonable for them to show signs of indecision. Agrippa's sudden aggressiveness would also be explained by his own sighting of Marcius and the armed men.

W. But you've gone and armed the plebeians better than ever before in theatrical history, and here they are retreating before Marcius's legionaries?

B. The legionaries are better armed still. Anyway they don't retreat. We can strengthen Shakespeare's text here still further. Their few moments' hesitation during the final arguments of the speech is now due to the changed situation arising from the appearance of armed men behind the speaker. And in these few moments we observe that Agrippa's ideology is based on force, on armed force, wielded by Romans.

W. But now there's unrest, and for them to unite there must be something more: war must break out.

R. Marcius can't let fly as he'd like to either. He turns up with armed men, but his hands are tied by the 'Senate's leniency'. They have just granted the mob senatorial representation in the form of the Tribunes. It was a marvellous stroke of Shakespeare's to make it Marcius who announces the establishment of the Tribunate. How do the plebeians react to that? What is their attitude to their success?

W. Can we alter Shakespeare?

B. I think we can alter Shakespeare if we are able alter him. But we agreed to begin only by discussing changes of interpretation so as to prove the usefulness of our analytical method even without adding new text.

W. Could the First Citizen be Sicinius, the man the Senate has just appointed Tribune? He would then have been at the head of the revolt, and would hear of his appointment from Marcius's mouth.

B. That's a major intervention.

W. There wouldn't have to be any change in the text.

B. All the same. A character has a kind of specific weight in the plot. Altering it might mean stimulating interest that would be impossible to satisfy later and so on.

R. The advantage would be that it allows a playable connection to be established between the revolt and the granting of the Tribunate. And the plebeians could congratulate their Tribune and themselves.

B. But there must be no playing down of the contribution the Volscians' attack makes to the establishment of the Tribunate; it's the main reason. Now you must start building and take everything into account.

W. The plebeians ought to share Agrippa's astonishment at this concession.

B. I don't want to come to any firm decision. And I'm not sure that this can be acted by pure miming, without any text. Again, if our group of plebeians includes a particular person who probably only represents the semi-plebeian section of Rome, then it will be seen as a part representing the whole. And so on. But I note your astonishment and inquisitiveness as you move around within this play and within these complex events on a particular morning in Rome, where there is much that a sharp eye can pick out. And certainly if you can find clues to these events, then all power to the audience!

W. We can try.

B. Most certainly.

R. And we ought to go through the whole play before deciding anything. You look a bit doubtful, B.

B. Look at it the other way. – How do they take the news that war has broken out?

W. Marcius welcomes it, like Hindenburg did, as a bath of steel.

B. Careful.

R. You mean this is a war of self-defence.

P. That doesn't necessarily mean the same thing here as usually in our discussions and judgements. These wars led to the unification of Italy.

R. Under Rome.

B. Under democratic Rome.

W. That had got rid of its Coriolanuses.

B. Rome of the People's Tribunes.

P. Here is what Plutarch says about what happened after Marcius's death: 'First the Volscians began to quarrel with the Aequi, their friends and allies, over the question of the supreme command, and violence and death resulted. They had marched out to meet the advancing Romans, but almost completely destroyed one another. As a result the Romans defeated them in a battle ...'

R. In brief, Rome without Marcius was not weaker, but stronger.

B. Yes, it's important not only to have read the play right through before starting to study the beginning, but also to have read the factual accounts of Plutarch and Livy, who were the dramatist's sources. But what I meant by 'careful' was: you can't just condemn wars without investigating them further, and it won't even do to divide them into wars of aggression and wars of defence. The two kinds merge into one another, for one thing. And only a classless society with a high level of production can get along without wars. Anyhow this much seems clear to me: Marcius has got to be shown as a patriot. It takes the most tremendous events – as in the play – to turn him into a deadly enemy of his

country.

R. How do the plebeians react to the news of the war?

P. We've got to decide that ourselves; the text gives no clue.

B. And unfortunately our own generation is particularly well qualified to judge this question. The choice is between letting the news come like a thunderbolt that smashes through everyone's defences, or else making something of the fact that it leaves them relatively unmoved. We couldn't possibly leave them unmoved without underlining how strange and perhaps terrible that is.

P. We must make it have tremendous effects, because it so completely alters the situation, if for no other reason.

W. Let's assume then that at first the news is a blow to them all.

R. Even Marcius? His immediate reaction is to say he's delighted.

B. All the same we won't make him an exception. He can say his famous sentence: 'I'm glad on't; then we shall ha' means to vent/Our musty superfluity', once he has recovered.

W. And the plebeians? It won't be easy to make them speechless using Shakespeare's non-existing text. Then there are still other questions. Are they to greet their new Tribunes? Do they get any advice from them? Does their attitude towards Marcius change at all?

B. We shall have to base our solution on the fact that *all* these questions remain unanswered; in other words, they have got to be raised. The plebeians must gather round the Tribunes to greet them, but stop short of doing so. The Tribunes must want to give advice, but stop short of it. The plebeians must stop short of adopting a new attitude to Marcius. It must all be swallowed up by the new situation. The stage direction that irritates us so much, 'Citizens steal away', simply represents the change that has taken place since they came on stage ('Enter a company of mutinous citizens with clubs, staves and other weapons'). The wind has changed, it's no longer a favourable wind for mutinies; a powerful threat affects *all* alike, and as far as the people are concerned, this threat is simply noted in a purely negative way.

R. You advised us to make a note in our analysis to record our discomfort.

B. And our admiration of Shakespeare's realism. We have no real excuse to lag behind Plutarch, who writes of the base people's 'utmost readiness' for the war. It is a new union of the classes, which has come about in no good way, and we must examine it and reconstitute it on the stage.

W. To start with, the People's Tribunes are included in the new union; they are left hanging useless in mid-air, and they stick out like sore thumbs. How are we to create this visible unity of two classes that have just been fighting one another out of these men and their unreconciled and irreconcilable opponent

Marcius, who has suddenly become so vitally needed, needed for Rome as a whole?

B. I don't think we'll get any further by going about it naively and waiting for bright ideas. We shall have to go back to the classic method of mastering such complex events. I marked a passage in Mao Zedong's essay 'On Contradiction'. What does he say?

R. In any given process that involves many contradictions there is always a main contradiction that plays the leading, decisive part; the rest are of secondary, subordinate significance. One example he gives is the Chinese Communists' willingness, once the Japanese attacked, to break off their struggle against Chiang Kai-shek's reactionary regime. Another possible example is that when Hitler attacked the USSR even the banished white Russian generals and bankers were quick to oppose him.

W. Isn't that a bit different?

B. A bit different but also a bit the same. But we must push on. We have a contradictory union of plebeians and patricians, which has got involved in a contradiction with the neighbouring Volscians. The second is the main contradiction. The contradiction between plebeians and patricians, the class struggle, has been put into 'cold storage' by the emergence of the new contradiction, the national war against the Volscians. But it hasn't disappeared. (The People's Tribunes 'stick out like sore thumbs'.) The Tribunate came about as a result of the outbreak of war.

W. But in that case how are we to show the plebeian-patrician contradiction being overshadowed by the main Roman-Volscian contradiction, and how can we do it in such a way as to bring out the domination of the patricians over the new plebeian leadership?

B. That's not the sort of problem that can be solved in cold blood. What's the position? Starving men on one side, armed men on the other. Faces flushed with anger now change colour once more. New lamentations will drown the old. The two opposed parties take stock of the weapons they are brandishing against one another. Will these be strong enough to ward off the common danger? It's poetic, what's taking place. How are we going to put it across?

W. We'll mix up the two groups: there must be a general loosening-up, with people going from one side to the other. Perhaps we can use the incident when Marcius knocks into the patrician Lartius on his crutches and says: 'What, art thou stiff? Stand'st out?' Plutarch says in connection with the plebeians' revolt: 'Those without any means were taken bodily away and locked up, even though covered with scars from the battles and ordeals suffered in campaigns for the fatherland. They had conquered the enemy, but their creditors had not the least

pity for them.’ We suggested before that there might be a disabled man of this sort among the plebeians. Under the influence of the naive patriotism that’s so common among ordinary people, and so often shockingly abused, he could come up to Lartius, in spite of his being a member of the class that has so maltreated him. The two war victims could recall their common share in the last war; they could embrace, applauded by all, and hobble off together.

B. At the same time that would be a good way of establishing that it is generally a period of wars.

W. Incidentally, do you feel a disabled man like this could perhaps prevent our group from standing as *pars pro toto*?

B. Not really. He would represent the veterans. By the way, I think we could follow up our idea about the weapons. Cominius as Consul and Commander-in-Chief could grin as he tests those home-made weapons designed for civil war and then give them back to their owners for use in the patriotic one.

P. And what about Marcius and the Tribunes?

B. That’s an important point to settle. There mustn’t be any kind of fraternization between them. The new-found union is not absolute. It’s liable to break at the junction points.

W. Marcius can invite the plebeians condescendingly and with a certain contempt to follow him to the Capitol, and the Tribunes can encourage the disabled man to greet Titus Lartius, but Marcius and the Tribunes don’t look at each other, they turn their backs on one another.

R. In other words both sides are shown as patriots, but the conflicts between them remain visible.

B. And it must also be made clear that Marcius is in charge. War is still his business – especially his – much more than the plebeians’.

R. Looking at the play’s development and being alert to contradictions and their exact nature have certainly helped us in this section of the play’s plot. What about the hero’s character, which is also something that must be sketched out and in precisely this section of the plot?

B. It’s one of those parts that should not be built up from his first appearance but from a later one. I would say a battle scene for Coriolanus, if it hadn’t become so hard for us Germans to represent great wartime achievements after two idiotic world wars.

P. You want Marcius to be Busch, the great people’s actor who is a fighter himself. Is that because you need someone who won’t make the hero too likeable?

B. Not too likeable, and likeable enough. If we want to generate appreciation of his tragedy, we must put Busch’s mind and personality at the hero’s disposal.

He'll lend his own value to the hero, and he'll be able to understand him, both his greatness and his costliness.

P. You know Busch's concern. He says he's no bruiser, nor an aristocratic figure.

B. He's wrong about aristocratic figures, I think. And he doesn't need physical force to inspire fear in his enemies. We mustn't forget a 'superficial' point: if we are going to represent half the Roman plebs with five to seven men and the entire Roman army with something like nine – and not because of a lack of actors – we can't very well have a 100-kilo Coriolanus.

W. Usually you're for developing characters step by step. Why not this one?

B. It may be because he doesn't have a proper development. His switch from being the most Roman of the Romans to becoming their deadliest enemy is due precisely to the fact that he stays the same.

P. *Coriolanus* has been called the tragedy of pride.

R. Our first analysis made us feel the tragedy lay, both for *Coriolanus* and for Rome, in his belief that he was irreplaceable.

P. Isn't that because the play only comes to life for us when interpreted like this, because we find the same kind of thing here and feel the tragedy of the conflicts that result from it?

B. Undoubtedly.

W. A lot will depend on whether we can portray Coriolanus and what happens to and around him in such a light that he can maintain this belief. His usefulness has got to be beyond all doubt.

B. A typical detail: since we're talking about his pride, let's try to find out where he displays modesty, following Stanislavsky's example, who asked the performer playing the miser to show him the point at which he was generous.

W. Are you thinking of when he takes over command?

B. Something like that. Let's leave it at that for a start.

P. Well, what does the scene teach us, if we present it that way?

B. That the position of the oppressed classes can be strengthened by the threat of war and weakened by its outbreak.

R. That lack of a solution can unite the oppressed class and arriving at a solution can divide it, and that a war may be viewed as such a solution.

P. That differences in income can divide the oppressed class.

R. That soldiers and even war victims can romanticize the war they survived and be easy game for new ones.

W. That the finest speeches cannot wipe away realities, but can hide them for a time.

R. That 'proud' gentlemen are not too proud to pay obeisance to their own



sort.

P. That the oppressors' class isn't wholly united either.

B. And so on.

R. Do you think that all this and the rest of it can be read in the play?

B. Read in it and read into it.

P. Is it for the sake of these perceptions that we are going to do the play?

B. Not just for that reason. We want to have and to communicate the fun of dealing with a slice of illuminated history. And to have first-hand experience of dialectics.

P. Isn't the second point a considerable refinement, reserved for a handful of connoisseurs?

B. No. Even with popular ballads or the peepshows at fairs the simple people (who are so far from simple) love stories of the rise and fall of great men, of eternal change, of the ingenuity of the oppressed, of the potentialities of humankind. And they hunt for the truth that is 'behind it all'.

[*'Studium des ersten Auftritts in Shakespeares Coriolan'*, BFA 23/386-402]

Written in 1953 and November 1955. Between 1951 and 1953, Brecht and his team of collaborators worked on adapting Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* for the Berliner Ensemble. The first act was completed in 1951 and published in *Theaterarbeit* (see *Berliner Ensemble Adaptations*, edited by David Barnett, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014). This conversation took place mainly in November 1953 among Brecht, Käthe Rüllicke, Peter Palitzsch and Manfred Wekwerth. The initials stand for their names, but here, as in other such dialogues, the names do not necessarily reflect their opinions. Brecht distributed the arguments that were important to him to certain individuals as needed. The final version of this scene includes many amendments to Shakespeare's text, some of them as foreshadowed in the dialogue. P's reference to 'famous ancestors' is to Brecht's poem 'Die Literatur wird durchforscht werden' ('Literature Will Be Scrutinised' in *Poems 1913–1956*, pp. 344–5, also under the title 'Wie künftige Zeiten unsere Schriftsteller beurteilen werden', written in 1939). Ernst Busch was the only one of Brecht's main pre-1933 actors (other than Helene Weigel, of course) to join him in the Berliner Ensemble, where his parts included Galileo, Azdak in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and the cook in *Mother Courage*. Brecht rehearsed the role of Galileo with Busch from 14 November 1955 until 27 March 1956.

## *Relative Haste*

In Ostrovsky's *A Protégée of the Mistress* there is an afternoon tea during which the 'well-intentioned' lady of the house passes judgement on her ward rather casually. It would have been natural to make the drinking of tea itself a casual affair, but we decided on a silent ceremony that made the drinking of tea very important. The servants were to prepare the tea, bring the samovar, spread the tablecloth and so on endlessly slowly, yet attentively. The oldest serf oversaw the maids, who set the table. The director then had him make a large (by the way, unhurried) motion with his arm after a period of time, encouraging the maids to make haste. This demonstrated control and dominance. Haste is relative. A tardy servant carrying a bowl of biscuits who 'barged slowly' into the room was part of the same problem and was also difficult to execute.

[*'Relative Eile'*, BFA 23/403]

Written in 1955. Alexander Nikolayevich Ostrovsky's play *Vospitannitsa* (1859) was adapted by Johannes von Günther for the Berliner Ensemble, where it opened in December 1955, directed by Angelika Hurwicz.

## *A Detour*

### *(The Caucasian Chalk Circle)*

P: They plan to cut out the 'trip into the northern mountains' in X. The play is long, and they argue that the whole act is just a detour in the end. After she has brought the child out of the area of immediate danger, we see how the maid wants to get rid of him, but decides to keep him after all, and that's what's important, they say.

B: In the new plays, you should study detours carefully before taking a short-cut. It could indeed seem longer. In *The Threepenny Opera* some theatres cut out one of the two arrests of the robber Macheath because both times he is arrested when he goes to the brothel after his escape instead of fleeing. His downfall became the fact that he went to the brothel, instead of that he went to the brothel too often, because he was careless, not because he was too careless. In brief, being brief was the long way around.

P: They argue that the maid's claim to the child during the later trial is weakened if we diminish her affection for him.

B: First, the trial is not about the maid's claim to the child, but rather the child's claim to a better mother, and the maid's suitability as a mother. Her very

reasonable hesitation before taking charge of the child proves her dependability and usefulness.

R: I find the hesitation good as well. Friendliness is limited; there is only so much of it. A person has a certain measure of friendliness, no less, no more, and it also depends on the given situation. It can be used up, replenished and so on.

W: That's a realistic point of view.

B: It seems too mechanical to me. Unfriendly. What about the following observation? Evil times make it dangerous for humane people to act humanely. Grusha the maid's self-interest and her interest in the child are in conflict with each other. She has to recognize both interests and attempt to be guided by both. This observation, I believe, leads to a richer and more dynamic portrayal of the role of Grusha. It is true.

[*'Ein Umweg'*, BFA 23/403-4]

Written in 1955. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* opened at the Berliner Ensemble in October 1954, directed by Brecht (see [Plates 26](#) and [28](#)).

### ***Another Case of Applied Dialectic***

When a young Ensemble director rehearsed *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, the short piece B. adapted from Synge's one-act play, Weigel played Carrar, which she had done years ago in exile under B.'s direction. We had to tell B. that the scene in which the fisher's wife digs up the rifles, gives them to her brother and younger son and then accompanies them to the front was not believable. Even Weigel was unsure what was missing. When B. came to rehearsal, Weigel masterfully played the increasing demoralization brought about by each new visit from the villagers and each new argument they brought against her, this woman who had become pious and bitterly opposed to violence. When they brought the body of her son who had peacefully gone fishing, she played the woman's collapse masterfully. Nevertheless, B. also found her change of heart not completely believable. We gathered around B. and traded opinions. 'It would make sense if it was just the agitation of her neighbour and brother that got to her. The death of her son is too much,' someone said. 'You're overestimating political agitation,' said B., shaking his head. 'If it were just her son's death,' someone else said. 'She would merely collapse,' said B. 'It doesn't make sense,' Weigel herself finally said. 'She receives one blow after another, but the effect of the blows is not believable.' – 'Say that again,' asked B. Weigel repeated the sentence. 'Bit-by-bit, everything softens,' said B. We had found the problem. Weigel had been playing Carrar by giving in visibly each time after being shaken by a blow, until she collapsed upon receiving the hardest of them. She

should have played it so that Carrar hardened after each blow that shook her, and then collapse *suddenly* with the final one. ‘Yes, that’s how I did it in Copenhagen,’ said Weigel, astonished, ‘and it was correct.’ – ‘Strange,’ said B., when the rehearsal had confirmed our intuitions, ‘how following the law of the dialectic requires such effort every time.’

[‘*Anderer Fall angewandter Dialektik*’, BFA 23/404-5]

Written in 1953 (probably by one of the dramaturges). Brecht’s one-act play *Señora Carrar’s Rifles*, based on John Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1905), opened at the Berliner Ensemble in November 1952, directed by Brecht and Egon Monk. Helene Weigel had played the title role in February 1938 in Copenhagen (Theater Borups Højskole) (see [Plate 19](#)).

### ***Letter to the Actor Playing Young Hörder in Winter Battle***

According to the rehearsal reports and your own statements, you still seem to be having considerable difficulties playing young Hörder. You complain that on many evenings you do not hit the right tone in one particular scene, which causes everything that follows to go wrong of its own accord.

We’ve occasionally warned you about the term ‘hit the right tone’ because it implies a particular style of acting that in our opinion is not correct. When you say ‘the right tone’, you do not mean ‘natural inflection.’ By ‘hitting the right tone’ you seem to mean a procedure like the one that takes place in shooting booths at carnivals, where an entire musical mechanism is set into motion when a shot hits the bulls eye at the centre of a target. The comparison with the carnival is not meant to be insulting – we are ‘targeting’ something that is not unworthy but rather incorrect.

What has happened is that on one hand you have not fixed the role firmly enough, meaning that the tone can slip away from you, and on the other hand you have fixed it too firmly, so that the tone you hit in one scene makes all the other scenes dependent on it. In such a case the expression ‘to fix’ is also a dubious one. We usually use it in a different way, when we refer to the practice of ‘fixing’ drawings so they cannot be smeared.

You should really not try to fix a particular tone, but rather the behaviour of the figure to be played, independent from (if also occasionally connected to) the tone of a given scene. And the most important thing is your behaviour towards this figure, which determines your figure’s behaviour.

But how to do this?

Your difficulties begin in the scene with the long monologues. For Hörder’s

friend and comrade Nohl, doubts about this winter battle become full-blown and push him to act – to desert. In his monologues Nohl reaches the state of calm that follows a decision. Hörder, believing his friend to have ‘succumbed’ to the doubt that he himself passionately fends off, becomes ever more agitated. And now comes the hard part. The fact that he insists so violently on this (Nazi) point of view, which comes naturally to him, shakes this point of view or shows how it is shaken, creating something sick. You are superbly successful in showing this sickness – that this young man who has been indoctrinated by the Nazis must, when he comes under attack by the doubt Nohl expressed, use excessive violence in the region of doubt. It is a sickness only from a Nazi standpoint, and it shows the deeper sickness of Nazism, out of which Hörder will work toward a new sense of health. You play the scene less successfully on those evenings when you set the pitch ‘too high’ from the beginning, when you allow yourself to take on a shrill tone and contorted features at the beginning of the scene.

From here on out, the contradiction *healthy – sick* plays the decisive role in the transformation. In your next scene Nohl has crossed over to the Russians and cast the young Hörder alone into the company of the Nazi officers, increasing his isolation from them. His trip home shows his isolation from his homeland. As I see it, he is hit with four blows: the contempt of the deserter Nohl’s wife, whom he used to worship fervently; a very tender German folksong; his mother’s terrible revelation that his brother was executed by the state; and a quote from Ernst Moritz Arndt’s book on the civil rights and duties of a citizen soldier. He barely registers his father’s subsequent threat to turn him over to the Gestapo.

The way you portray Hörder running away, sobbing like a child while leaving his mother the task of holding his father to account, struck some critics as ‘pathological’. They probably think the Prince of Homburg’s fear of death is also pathological and, what’s worse, they’re (almost) hopeless petty bourgeoisie, who delight in stripping a person of class attributes, in the hopes of uncovering *the person*, the person per se, the universal person. The young man is at this moment definitely not a hero and under no circumstances should we speak of heroes ‘in their weaker moments, their unheroic moments.’ It is much healthier to speak of people in their heroic moments. He doesn’t clean the Augean stables like Hamlet, nor does he do anything else here. He returns dutifully to the front after his holiday. You are right here, you play with equal parts engagement and superiority, and in doing so you relegate a beloved heroic cliché to the scrap heap of the pantheon of arts, which the masters frequent.

Of course, after this the difficulties begin once again. You have two more short scenes. (Hörder refuses to take part in the execution of partisans, is condemned to death, and refuses to kill himself). You have to show how

becoming mentally healthy brings about death.

Gleaming medals, the Knight's Cross have not been able to keep Hörder away from the people that have to pay for them; the gleam did not blind him permanently. Hörder stops working actively for Hitler. But he never reaches the stage of actively working against Hitler. He did not clean the Augean stables of the family, and he does not clean the Augean stables of the state. He withdraws.

(You might object that the circumstances no longer allowed him to become a hero. But that is of no help. In any case, he does not become a hero. The entire bourgeois class to which he belongs and from which he *does not separate himself* at the very end, finds itself in exactly the same situation: the circumstances do not allow certain things.)

In the partisan scene your expression is excellent (although admittedly not to those who scream for heroes): Hörder's contradictory horror when he refuses to give the command to bury the partisans alive, horror at the barbarity and also at his own insubordination. However, in the death scene you almost never succeed in finding the mix of the heroic and wretched tone of a man who has finally come to his senses. In the *War Primer*, which I have never shown you, you can see how close you have come to the attitude of the completely confused German soldiers who were met by the Russians near Moscow. But Hörder's invocation of the other Germany is a matter of luck. It should be a Roland-like call for an 'other' Germany. Here, when you refuse to show any shock at all, you are not hindered by fear of pathos, but rather by the fear of false pathos, that is, naive, nationalistic pathos, the actual historical pathos of Roland, which has become empty and deteriorated to a caricature, haunts our stages. You should feel respect for Hörder here and at the same time a pity that counteracts this respect. This means that the key is your attitude towards the figure you are playing. Only knowledge about the state of history and the ability to create attitudes that contradict each other will be able to help you here.

This knowledge and ability can be acquired. They require you to have a firm point of view in this age of great wars between peoples and classes.

[*'Brief an den Darsteller des jungen Hörder in der "Winterschlacht"'* , BFA  
23/405-8]

Dated as 1954, according to its first publication, but more likely written in 1955. Johannes R. Becher's *Winter Battle* (1945) opened at the Berliner Ensemble in January 1955, directed by Brecht and Manfred Wekwerth. As late as May 1955, Brecht asked his directing assistant Lothar Bellag to review all the difficult passages with Ekkehard Schall, cast in the role of

Hörder. The scene ‘with the long monologues’ is Act IV, Sc. 2, and the partisan scene is Act V, Sc. 2. The reference to Ernst Moritz Arndt is to his *Katechismus für den deutschen Kriegs-und Wehrmann* (1813; Catechism for the German Warrior and Soldier). The image in the *War Primer* refers most likely to Nr. 67 (see Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, translated and edited by John Willett, Libris 1998). The reference to Roland is to the eleventh-century French epic *Chanson de Roland*.

### ***Mother Courage Played in Two Ways***

The normal acting style that causes empathy with the protagonist allows the spectator (according to many accounts) enjoyment of an odd pleasure: triumph in the indestructibility of a person full of vitality who is afflicted by the turbulence of war. Courage’s active participation in the war is not taken seriously; the war is a source of income, perhaps the only one. Except for this single moment of participation, in spite of it, the effect is similar to the one made by Schweik, where (of course in a comedic context) the spectator triumphs with Schweik over the plans the great warring powers have made to sacrifice him. The similar effect caused by Courage is of much less social value because her participation, although portrayed very indirectly, is not taken into account. In fact this effect is downright negative. Courage appears mainly as a mother who, like Niobe, is unable to protect her children from the catastrophe of war. Her profession as businesswoman and the way in which she carries it out give her at the most something ‘realistically unidealistic’ but do not reduce the war’s catastrophic quality. Here, too, the war is of course purely negative, but in the end she survives it, if not unscathed. Weigel on the other hand used a technique preventing total empathy and treated the businesswoman not as a natural profession, but rather as a historical one, that is, as belonging to a historical and *ephemeral* era, and the war as the best time for business. Here, too, business was a source of income that no one questioned, but also a polluted source, from which Courage drank death. The merchant mother became a great living contradiction, which disfigured and deformed her to the point of unrecognizability. In the battlefield scene, which is usually cut in stagings, she really was a hyena; she handed over the shirts only because she saw her daughter’s hate, and more than anything because she feared violence, and she sprang like a tiger at the soldiers with the coat, cursing. After her daughter’s disfigurement she condemned the war with the same profound honesty with which she praised it in the scene immediately following. This is how Weigel formed the contradictions in their abruptness and irreconcilability. Her

daughter's rebellion against her (when she tries to save Halle) numbed her completely and did not teach her anything. The tragedy of Courage and her life, which was profoundly tangible to the spectators, consisted of the fact that there was a horrific contradiction here that destroyed a person, a contradiction that could be resolved, but only by society itself and only through long, terrible struggles. The moral superiority of this acting technique consisted in the fact that humans, even the most vital, were shown to be destructible!

[*'Mutter Courage, in zweifacher Art dargestellt'*, BFA 23/408-10]

Written in 1951. Brecht refers to the first production of the play in Zurich (opened in April 1941, directed by Leopold Lindtberg with Therese Giehse cast as Mother Courage) and to the first production in Germany by the Berliner Ensemble at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin (opened in January 1949, directed by Brecht and Erich Engel with Helene Weigel cast as Mother Courage, see [Plates 22](#) and [25](#)). When Brecht and Ruth Berlau later compiled the *Modelbook of Mother Courage* (published 1958, see *Brecht on Performance*), they took the opportunity to juxtapose and contrast photographs of the Berlin (Deutsches Theater 1949 and Berliner Ensemble 1951) and Munich (Kammerspiele 1950) productions, the latter again with Giehse.

### ***Example of a Scenic Innovation through the Observation of a Mistake***

In the Chinese agitation play *Millet for the Eighth*, farmers smuggle millet to Mao Zedong's revolutionary Eighth Army. After the play had been adapted, the young director explained some of the details of his basic scenic design to Brecht.

The play takes place in a town hall's main room and the room adjoining it. When the director told him about a small table he wanted to place in the middle of the stage where the farmers were to serve first a merchant who was collaborating with the Japanese and then a troop leader from garrison, Brecht made him aware that they would be sitting with their backs to the entry – in a place where they were unwelcome they could hardly be happy about this. The director immediately agreed, but then hesitated to move the table to the side because the stage design would lose its balance. After all, he noted, on the one side there was nothing but the adjoining room that was only seldom used in the performance! 'Aha, a mistake in your set design!' said B. with interest. 'Do you really need both rooms? Couldn't the adjoining room be set up just when you need it? By the farmers putting up a screen?' The director explained why this was impossible. (B. had participated in the adaptation, but when it came to



directing, he forgot everything that he knew from reading or working on the piece and ‘let the flow of the story surprise him.’) ‘Fine,’ said B., ‘then we’ll have to bring some life to the adjoining room. We need an action this is connected to the main plot and leads to something. What could they be doing there that relates to the smuggling plans? There’s another mistake that I remember. When he leaves the stage, it’s not clear that the partisan, who is faking a raid on the village by the Eighth Army so the farmers can explain the missing millet to the Japanese, will now transport the millet over the mountain himself. What season is it?’ – ‘August, because the millet was just harvested. You won’t be able to change that.’ – ‘We can’t have a warm jacket sewn for him ... ? You know, a woman could be sewing a warm jacket, for example, in the adjoining room, that is, mending it.’ We agreed that the packsaddle for the mayor’s donkey should be mended. They needed the donkey to transport the millet.

We decided on two women, mother and daughter, so that they could whisper and laugh when the collaborator was locked in the cupboard with the files. This idea quickly proved to be productive in several respects. The women’s giggles could emphasize the funny side of the fake raid and of the collaborator’s presence in the cupboard. The collaborator could show his lack of respect for the women by paying them the same attention as he would a straw mat on the floor and so on. More than anything, this action clarified how the entire population cooperated, and it was a poetic moment when the women handed the packsaddle over to the partisans after mending it. ‘Mistakes can produce effects,’ B. said in leaving.

[‘*Beispiel einer szenischen Erfindung durch Wahrnehmen eines Fehlers*’, BFA 23/410-11]

Written in 1953, according to its first published version in the 1956 Modelbook. *Millet for the Eighth* (1949), a Chinese comedy by Luo Ding, Zhang Fan and Zhu Xingnan, was adapted for the Berliner Ensemble by Elisabeth Hauptmann and Manfred Wekwerth and opened in April 1954. It was one of two model productions for amateur theatre groups.

### ***Something about Representing Character***

The Chinese folk play *Millet for the Eighth* shows how a village, led by its mayor, cunningly deprives the Japanese occupiers and their allied gangs of Chiang Kai-shek supporters of its millet harvest, so that the harvest can be given to the revolutionary Eighth Army.

For the part of the village mayor, the director wanted an actor who could play a cunning person. B. criticized this. Why shouldn't the mayor be a simple, wise man? His enemies force him to take short-cuts and resort to trickery. It may be that the young partisan with great ideas has the original plan, but the mayor executes the plan, even when the young partisan wants to improvise and think of something else because he feels the mounting difficulties make the plan impossible. It's a village in China. It's not *the* village, where an especially cunning person lives. Cunning arises from necessity.

[*'Etwas über Charakterdarstellung'*, BFA 23/411-2]

Written in 1953. See previous note.

### ***Conversation about Coerced Empathy***

**B:** I have here Gottsched's translation of Horace's *Poetics*. He nicely formulates a theory that Aristotle posited for the theatre and that we think about a lot.

You must enchant and win the reader's breast  
We laugh when others laugh and also shed tears  
When others are sad. Therefore, if you want me to weep  
First show me your eyes full of tears.

In this famous passage Gottsched refers directly to Cicero's writings on the art of rhetoric, to his account of the actor Polus who was meant to play Electra weeping for her brother. Because his only son had recently died, he brought the urn holding his ashes on to the stage and spoke the moving verse 'appropriating it so strongly for his own situation that his own loss forced actual tears. There was not a single person there who could have held back tears.'

We truly must characterize this as a barbaric action.

**W:** In the same way the actor playing Othello could wound himself with a dagger in order to produce in us the pleasure of sympathy! It would be easier for him if he read reviews praising one of his colleagues right before the performance. Then we would enter, no doubt, into that appealing state of not being able to hold back our tears.

**B:** The intent, in any case, is to fob off on us some kind of transportable pain, that is, pain detached from its source, which can be placed intact at the disposal of some other purpose. The actual poetic action disappears like meat into a cleverly prepared sauce with a specific flavour.

**P:** Fine, Gottsched might be barbaric in this case, Cicero too. But Horace is referring to a real sentiment that is brought about by the action being portrayed,

not a borrowed one.

W: Why does he say: 'If you want me to weep ... ' (Si vis me flere)? Should my soul be trampled until the 'liberating' tears start to fall? Or should I be shown actions that make me tender enough to find my way to humane behaviour?

P: Why aren't you able to do that when you see a human being suffer and you feel sympathy?

W: Because I also have to know why he is suffering. Take Polus, for example. Maybe his son was a villain. He might suffer nonetheless, but why should I?

P: You can ascertain this from the action on stage to which he has lent his pain.

W: If he allows me to. If he doesn't coerce me into giving into his pain in any case, a pain that he in any case wanted me to feel.

B: Let's pretend that the sister is crying because her brother is going to war, and that it's the Peasants' War, and he is a peasant and goes along with the peasants. Should we give ourselves over completely to her pain? Or not at all? We must be able to give ourselves over to her pain and also to not give ourselves over. Our actual emotion arises through recognizing and feeling this ambivalent action.

[*'Gespräch über die Nötigung zur Einfühlung'*, BFA 23/412-3]

Written in 1953.

## Miscellaneous

### Cultural Policy and Academy of Arts

The Academy of Arts has published some proposals affecting not only the work of artists in the German Democratic Republic but also the character and condition of such institutions as film, radio and the press. Its right to criticize did not remain uncontested. Roughly speaking, the argument was that in the past it had failed to develop a Marxist point of view, that of Socialist Realism, or to give effective support to the government's cultural policy. How valid is this assertion?

The Academy of Arts is at once an old and a new institution. It was founded in 1696. In 1950 it was set up anew by the government of the German Democratic Republic. Distinguished artists were selected to be its members.

Their qualification for being invited lay in their progressiveness. Their place of domicile did not matter. In a sense it is a very incomplete Academy, because there are important artists living in West Germany who could not join it without being liable to persecution by the authorities there.

It is a mark of the dangerous degree of self-deception found among some of our cultural policy makers that they demanded things of the Academy of Arts that we can only ask of Marxists. As it stands, the Academy cannot be regarded as Marxist, and however reasonable it is to criticize its work from a Marxist standpoint, it would be wrong to expect to work with it as if it were a Marxist body. The most that can be said is that its Marxist members – and some of the most important are that – have failed to make Marxists of the others.

I myself am naturally of the view that an artist who is merely progressive (in the generally accepted sense) cannot get the best out of his talents. There has for that matter hardly been a single discussion in the Academy in which the Marxist view has not been strongly put forward. (And those discussions that led to the adoption of the proposals referred to above provided a heartening demonstration of unity about some of the most fundamental principles of the German Democratic Republic.) Yet it cannot be denied that the attitude of many of our artists towards a major part of our cultural policy is one of rejection and incomprehension; and to me the reason seems to be that the politicians did not take this great store of ideas and make it available to the artists, but forced it on them like so much bad beer. It was the Commissions' unfortunate practices, their dictates combined with weak arguments, their unimaginative administrative measures, their cheap Marxist jargon that offended the artists (Marxists included) and prevented the Academy from taking up a sensible position on aesthetic issues. Particularly those artists who are realists felt certain demands of the Commissions and critics to be more like presumptions. No new state can be built up without trust; it is surplus energy that builds a new society. But superficial optimism can lead it into danger.

Those features of our social life must be stressed that are full of implications for the future. But prettification and whitewashing are the deadliest enemies not just of beauty but of political good sense. The life of the labouring population, the struggle of the working class for a worthwhile, creative life is a pleasing theme for the arts. But the mere presence on the canvas of workers and peasants has little to do with this theme. Art must aim at broad intelligibility. But society must increase the understanding of art by general education. The needs of the population have to be satisfied. But only by fighting at the same time against its need for trash. Often the right thing is asked for but the wrong kind of thing encouraged.

For administrative purposes, and given the officials available, it may well be simpler to work out certain schemes for works of art. Then the artists have merely to fit their thoughts (or possibly those of the administration?) into the given form, and everything will be 'alright'. But the living material so urgently demanded then becomes living material for coffins. Art has its own rights.

Realism from a socialist standpoint: that is a great and comprehensive directive, and a personal style and an individual viewpoint do not contradict it but help it on. The campaign against formalism must not simply be regarded as a political task, but must be given a political content. It is part of the working class's struggle for authentic solutions to social problems, so that phony solutions in the arts must be combated as phony social solutions, not as aesthetic errors. Politicians may be surprised, but most artists find the language of politics easier to understand than a hastily compiled aesthetic vocabulary that has nothing to offer but ex-cathedra pronouncements of a nebulous kind.

Looked at from the point of view of the arts, has our artistic policy of the past few years been a realistic one? Our artists are producing for a public recruited from various classes. Its level of education and also its degree of demoralization are quite varied. Equally various are the needs that art must satisfy. The state is primarily interested in the workers; our best artists are primarily interested in them too. But at the same time there are other classes' tastes and needs that must be taken account of. All this can only be accomplished by a highly qualified, highly differentiated art. For a truly socialist art the question of quality is politically decisive.

Here again political quality plays a considerable part. It is the job of art criticism to reject what is politically primitive. Our artistic policy has not been unsuccessful in this regard. We cannot expect to achieve the political level of the Soviet Union in a few years, but its example is a help to us. Following that example, however, would lead nowhere if we were unable to modify it to suit our own particular conditions. To put it crudely, we have more of the old and less of the new. Large sections of our population still have capitalist prejudices. This is even true of parts of the working class. In battling these ideas, the arts must do their bit. We have been too quick to turn our backs on the immediate past, anxious to set our face to the future. But the future will depend on our overcoming the past. Where are the works of art that show the vast defeat suffered by the German workers in 1933, from which they are only slowly recovering? At the same time they would have to show heroic examples of a resolute struggle. And they would inspire our present struggle by providing it with knowledge and examples.

Our Socialist Realism must also be a critical realism.

Our republic has enabled notable cultural achievements. Favourable conditions have been created. If we can manage to increase the general productivity of the whole people, and not only certain production figures, then art will acquire and transmit an entirely new impetus. Our theatres, exhibitions, concerts and libraries will be visited by larger and larger crowds, more and more well-educated people, people with new and fascinating objectives. Freed from administrative shackles the great conception of Socialist Realism, of a deeply humane, earth-oriented art that will liberate every human capacity, will be greeted by our best artists as the blessed gift of the revolutionary proletariat, which is what it is.

[‘*Kulturpolitik und Akademie der Künste*’, BFA 23/256-60]

Written in July/August 1953 and first published in the official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* on 13 August 1953. The occasion for Brecht’s polemic is an article by Walter Besenbruch (professor of aesthetics at the Humboldt University in East Berlin appointed in 1953) published in *Neues Deutschland* on 19 July 1953. The proposals mentioned in the opening paragraph were made by a commission of the Academy of Arts – formed to make recommendations about developing the arts – in which Brecht played a major role. The commission’s ten points were published in *Neues Deutschland* on 12 July 1953 (see *Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp. 332–5). The (East) German Academy of Arts was set up on the ruins of the old Prussian Academy, and was originally designed to be an ‘all-German’ body. The administrative commissions Brecht criticizes are the State Commission for Artistic Affairs (responsible for theatres, orchestras and visual artists) and the Office for Literature and Publishing, which in 1954 were consolidated into a new Ministry of Culture.

## **Socialist Realism in the Theatre**

1. Socialist Realism means realistically reproducing the way people live together by artistic means from a socialist point of view. It is reproduced in such a way as to promote insight into society’s mechanisms and motivate socialist actions. In the case of Socialist Realism a large part of the pleasure that all art must inspire is pleasure at the possibility of society’s mastering human fate.
2. A Socialist Realist work of art lays bare the dialectical laws of movement of the social mechanism, whose revelation makes the mastering of human fate easier. It provokes pleasure in their recognition and observation.
3. A Socialist Realist work of art shows characters and events as historical and

alterable, and as contradictory. This entails a great change; a serious effort has to be made to find new means of representation.

4. A Socialist Realist work of art is based on a working-class viewpoint and appeals to all people of good will. It shows them the aims and outlook of the working class, which is trying to raise human productivity to a tremendous extent by transforming society and abolishing exploitation.

5. The Socialist Realist performance of old classical works is based on the view that humankind has preserved those works that gave artistic expression to advances towards a continually stronger, bolder and more delicate humanity. Such performance accordingly emphasizes those works' progressive ideas.

[‘*Sozialistischer Realismus auf dem Theater*’, BFA 23/286]

Typescript, written in September 1954. See Brecht's earlier comments on Socialist Realism (1938), as well as his critique of the campaign against formalism in the arts (in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, pp. 228–33 and pp. 309–16).

### **Can the Present-Day World Be Reproduced by Means of Theatre?**

I was interested to hear that in a discussion about the theatre Friedrich Dürrenmatt raised the question of whether it is still at all possible to reproduce the present-day world by means of theatre.

In my view this question, once posed, has to be allowed. The time has passed when a reproduction of the world by means of theatre need only be capable of being experienced. To be an experience, it needs to be accurate.

Many people have noticed that the theatrical experience is becoming weaker. There are not so many who realize the increasing difficulty of reproducing the present-day world. It was this realization that set some of us playwrights and theatre directors looking for new artistic methods.

As you know, being in the business yourselves, I have made a number of attempts to bring the present-day world and present-day people's lives together into the theatre's field of vision.

As I write, I am sitting only a few hundred yards from a large theatre, equipped with good actors and all the necessary machinery, where I can try out various ideas with numerous collaborators, most of them young, while around me on the tables lie 'model books' with thousands of photographs of our productions together with more or less precise descriptions of the most variegated problems and their provisional solutions. So every option is available to me; but I cannot say that the dramaturgical approach that I call 'non-

Aristotelian' and the epic style of acting that goes with it represent the *only* solution. However, one thing has become quite plain: the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as changeable.

People today value questions because of their answers. They are interested in events and situations when they can do something about them.

Some years ago in a newspaper I saw an advertisement showing the destruction of Tokyo by an earthquake. Most of the houses had collapsed, but a few modern buildings had been spared. The caption read 'Steel stood'. Compare this description with the classic account of the eruption of Etna by Pliny the Elder, and you will find that his description is a kind that the twentieth-century playwright must overcome.

In an age when science is in a position to change nature to such an extent as to make the world seem almost habitable, humankind can no longer describe itself as a victim, as the object of an environment that is secure but unfamiliar. It is scarcely possible to conceive of the laws of motion if we look at them from a tennis ball's point of view.

For it is because we are kept in the dark about the nature of human society – as opposed to nature in general – that we are now faced (so the scientists concerned assure us) by the complete destructibility of this planet that has barely been made fit to live in.

It will hardly surprise you to hear me say that the question of describing the world is a social one. I have maintained this for many years, and now I live in a state where a vast effort is being made to change society. You may not approve of the ways and means used – I hope, by the way, that you are really acquainted with them, and not just from reading the newspapers; you may not accept this particular ideal of a new world – and I hope you are acquainted with this ideal too; but you can hardly doubt that in the state where I live that an effort is being made to change the world and people's life together. And you may perhaps agree with me that the present-day world needs change.

For this short essay, which I ask you to treat as a friendly contribution to your discussion, it may be enough if I just submit my opinion that the present-day world can be reproduced even in the theatre, but only if it is understood as changeable.

[*'Kann die heutige Welt durch Theater wiedergegeben werden?'* BFA 23/340-1]

Written in March 1955 and first published in its entirety in the East Berlin cultural journal *Sonntag* (8 May 1955). The text was read as a contribution to the fifth 'Darmstädter Gespräch', a discussion on theatrical problems



held at Darmstadt (West Germany) on 23–25 April 1955. Although Brecht travelled to Frankfurt/Main, he decided not to continue on and participate in the discussion; instead he sent his colleague Hans Bunge to read the text on his behalf. The essay had a great impact on the course of the discussion, as Brecht was eager to learn from Bunge. The ‘large theatre’ is the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in East Berlin, which the Berliner Ensemble took over in March 1954. Previously the company had been a guest of the Deutsches Theater when playing in Berlin.

## Our London Season

For our guest performances in London we need to bear two things in mind. First: we shall be offering most of the audience a pure pantomime, a kind of silent film on the stage, for they know no German. (In Paris we had a festival audience, an international audience – and we ran for a few days only.) Second: in England there is a long-standing fear that German art (literature, painting, music) must be terribly heavy, slow, laborious and pedestrian.

So our playing needs to be quick, light, strong. This is not a question of rushing, but of speed, not simply of quick playing, but of quick thinking. We must keep the tempo of a run-through and infect it with quiet strength, with our own fun. In the dialogue the exchanges must not be offered reluctantly, as when offering somebody your last pair of boots, but must be tossed like so many balls. The audience has to see that here are a number of artists working together as a collective (ensemble) in order to convey stories, ideas, virtuoso feats to the spectator by a common effort.

Good work!

Brecht

[‘*Zum Londoner Gastspiel*’, BFA 30/475]

Dated 5 August 1956, this was the last of Brecht’s messages for the Berliner Ensemble’s notice board at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. He died on 14 August. The Ensemble’s London season opened on 27 August with Helene Weigel playing the title part in his production of *Mother Courage*. The three-week stay also included performances of *Trumpets and Drums* (Brecht’s adaptation of George Farquhar’s Restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer*) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

<sup>1</sup> When our theatres perform plays from other eras they tend to erase what separates us from them, to fill in the gap, to paper over the differences. But what becomes then of the pleasure in having an overview,

in remoteness, in dissimilarity? A pleasure that is at the same time the pleasure in what is close and specific to us!

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence with Goethe, 26 December 1797.

<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong, 'On Contradiction': One of the two sides of a contradiction is bound to be the principal one.

<sup>4</sup> Lenin: 'On the Question of Dialectics'.

<sup>5</sup> In this sense a physical act would be seen in the last scene of the production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* already known to many of you. Instead of having Courage simply mourning her child in a Pietà arrangement, she fetches a tarp to cover the dead body, gives the peasant farmers money for the burial and so on. The 'through line' of the scene is: remaining blind to the fact that business with war had cost her all of her children, she hurries back to 'doing business,' that is, back into the war.

<sup>6</sup> The theory of the 'through line' also helps to clarify the dialectical problem of 'empathy'. How and why I differentiate myself as a playwright from Stanislavsky deserves closer study.

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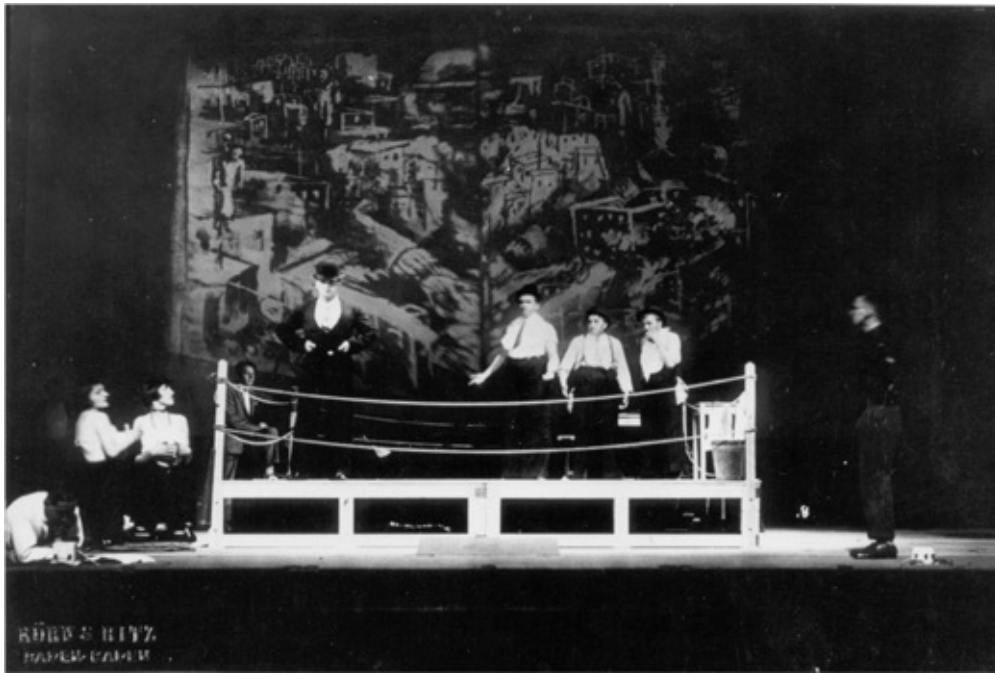
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**Plate 1** Brecht in Karl Valentin's orchestra, c. 1920. Brecht is second from the left.



**Plate 2** Production of Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, National Theatre, Oslo, 1906.



**Plate 3** *The Little Mahagonny*, German Chamber Music Festival, Baden-Baden, 13 October 1927. Brecht is standing on the right.





**Plate 4** *The Threepenny Opera*, nominally directed by Erich Engel, Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin, 1928.



**Plate 5** Premiere of *Man Equals Man*, Landestheater, Darmstadt, 1926.



**Plate 6** *Man Equals Man*, Staatstheater, Berlin, 1931.



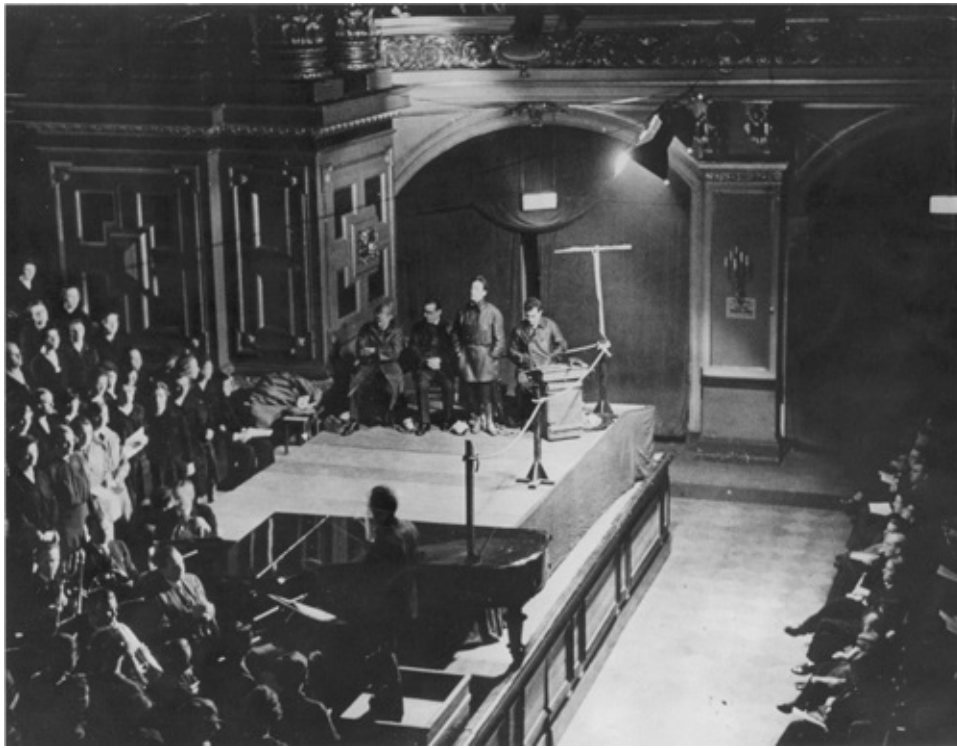
**Plate 7** Final scene of *The Threepenny Opera*, Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin, 1928. Posed publicity photograph.



**Plate 8** Finale, *The Threepenny Opera*, Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin, 1928. Actual production photograph.



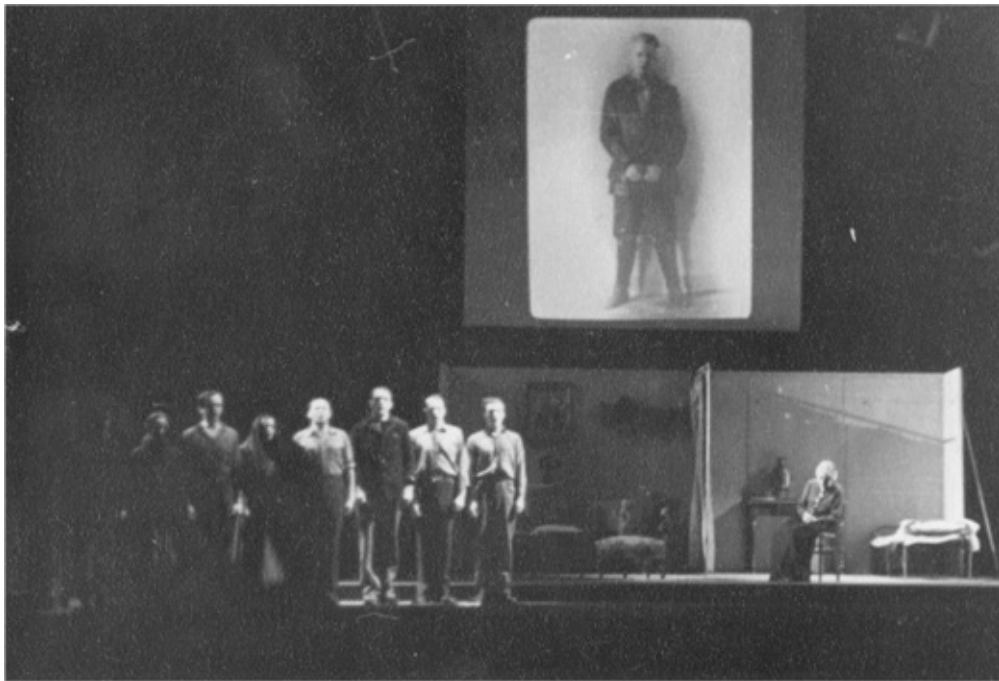
**Plate 9** *The Flight of the Lindberghs*, German Chamber Music Festival, Baden-Baden, 1929. Brecht is standing on the right.



**Plate 10** *The Decision*, Großes Schauspielhaus, Berlin, 1930.



**Plate 11** *The Mother*, Komödienhaus, Berlin, January 1932, the Gruppe Junger Schauspieler.



**Plate 12** *The Mother*, New York, November 1935.



**Plate 13** Berliner Ensemble production of *The Mother* at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 1951.



**Plate 14.** Erwin Piscator and Mei Lan-fang in Moscow, 1935. Photograph B. Vdovenko.



Liang Hung-yu's Victory Over the Prince of the Kins



Sword Dance

**Plate 15 and 16.** Mei Lan-fang in performance, mid-1930s: a victory celebration and a sword dance. Brecht had these photographs in his own collection.





**Plate 17.** Detail of 'Dulle Griet' ('Mad Meg') from Breughel's painting. Brecht pasted this picture in a file of materials for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.



**Plate 18.** *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* at the Riddersalen Theatre in Copenhagen, November 1936.



**Plate 19** *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, Borups Højskole, Copenhagen, March 1938, with Helene Weigel in the title role.



**Plate 20** *Life of Galileo*, Maxine Elliott's Theatre, New York, 1947, with Charles Laughton as Galileo, Scene 7.



**Plate 21** Brecht rehearsing with Ernst Busch (Galileo) and Regine Lutz (Virginia) at the Berliner Ensemble, 1956.



**Plate 22** Helene Weigel as Mother Courage, Berlin 1949.



**Plate 23** Helene Weigel as Mother Courage pulling her wagon, Berliner Ensemble, 1951 (1949 production).



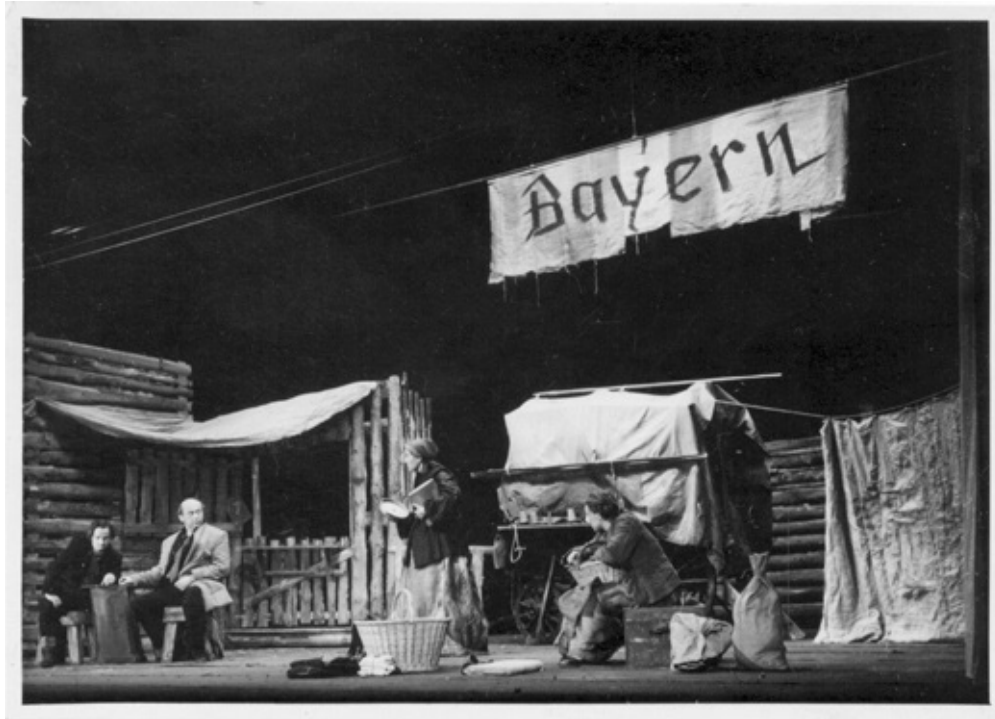
**Plate 24** Elisabeth Tuerschmann as Mother Courage pulling her wagon, Städtische Bühnen, Wuppertal, 1949.



**Plate 25** *Mother Courage and Her Children* in Brecht's staging, Berlin 1949, Scene 5.



**Plate 26** *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Berliner Ensemble, 1954, the chalk circle test.



**Plate 27** From Scene 6 of Erich Wind's staging of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Städtische Bühnen, Wuppertal, 1949.



**Plate 28** *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Berliner Ensemble, 1954, the chalk circle



test.



**Plate 29** Brecht during a rehearsal discussion of *Galileo*, 1956, with Isot Kilian, Erich Engel, Manfred Krug and others. Dialectics at work.