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# Introduction

## The Berliner Ensemble: a theatre company like no other

If one were to gather together the most significant theatre companies of the twentieth century, the Berliner Ensemble (BE), founded by Bertolt Brecht and his wife, Helene Weigel, in 1949, would surely find itself near the top of the list. 'Significant' here may denote not only companies that expanded the theatre's performance vocabulary, but also influenced the work of theatre-makers around the world through their productions, organization and/or philosophy. As will be shown, the BE amply satisfied all these criteria. Its inaugural season initiated a steady stream of innovative work that was later acknowledged internationally after tours to Paris and London in the mid 1950s. Brecht's death in 1956 caused widespread anxiety that the experiment would end, but the tenacity of Weigel and the willingness of the assistants Brecht had nurtured meant that the BE continued making theatre and developing the method he had established in his seven years as artistic director. As the only company in the world dedicated to Brecht's theories and practices, the BE became a distinctive and much fêted institution, attracting the interest of Peter Brook, the Living Theatre and Dario Fo (see pp. 192–3 and 324–5), amongst others, and of audiences worldwide for its regular foreign tours.

It is this distinctiveness that makes the BE such an attractive cultural phenomenon. Brecht returned to Germany in 1948 having spent fifteen years – the period of the Third Reich and its immediate aftermath – in exile in both Europe and the United States, largely cut off from practical work in the theatre. In this time, he had been theorizing the principles of a new theatre, and he finally got the opportunity to put his ideas into practice in 1949. Brecht's influence was pervasive and defined the aesthetic and political profile of the new company, during the last years of his life and for decades after his death in 1956. His ability to deliver a fresh, vibrant approach to making theatre set the BE apart from any other stage in Germany and, indeed, far further afield. This was quickly recognized by audiences and critics alike. Yet Brecht's practice was based on



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a method, not an array of devices, and so every production probed new formal and thematic problems, extending Brecht's theatrical means in the context of the particular play in question. The direction was never formulaic and thus the productions could always surprise and often provoke.

But Brecht looked further than just his own practice as a director. From the outset, he cultivated enthusiastic and able young collaborators, who were initially employed to assist him. Brecht's aim was to develop an active creative team that would learn from him before acting independently on their own projects. Before long, Brecht entrusted productions, under his supervision, to remarkably young colleagues as a means of promoting new ways of looking at his method. The strategy was successful: after he died, Brecht's assistants donned their mentor's mantle and led the BE out of the uncertainty brought about by the great loss. Thus, the BE was not simply a vehicle for Brecht to test out his ideas, it was a dynamic institution where the exchange of views and engagement in experiment helped to secure a liveliness in production, based on a new set of dramaturgical principles. Over time, however, Brecht's posthumous presence became an inhibiting factor. The BE itself had raised expectations about what spectators would encounter in a theatre dedicated to a single practitioner's ideas, and the pressure continually to produce radical and engaging work in the shadow of the master took its toll. A major crisis concerning the direction and sustainability of the company began in 1966 that had dire effects on both the productions and the personnel, but it is nonetheless remarkable that it took a whole decade after Brecht's death for creative fatigue finally to set in.

The productions did not, of course, exist in a vacuum: the BE was making theatre in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for the first forty years of its existence. The socialist state, founded scarcely a month after the BE in October 1949, followed the Soviet model and developed systems of political control that pervaded every level of society. The BE was certainly committed to the cause of socialism, and the authorities backed and encouraged the company for the most part, but the BE's probing examination of dramatic material meant that it would rarely offer work that could be considered 'propaganda'. Consequently, the BE's relationship to the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany – SED) was one that had to be negotiated and renegotiated as the party's agenda changed. In its first years, for example, the BE enjoyed the support of the SED before it found itself a target for ideologically driven attacks on the very ways that it made theatre. The relationship with the SED was also differentiated, due to the many agencies charged with supervising the company over the years. The BE's history is thus also closely linked to the ways in which the party

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treated it. Yet this was not a one-way, reactive process; ever since the triumphs on tour in Paris and London of the mid 1950s, the BE could use its international reputation to strengthen its position in matters of cultural policy. The SED always necessarily had the upper hand, yet it had in the BE a company that could stand its ground when it needed to, due to its international profile, its fame and its connections.

The BE offers itself as an intriguing and contradictory object of inquiry. It struggled to impose its dialectical approach to theatre-making, but made an indelible mark on theatre history. It preached the invigorating principles of Brecht's method, but could not liberate itself from the millstone of Brecht's reputation. Its aesthetics were informed by Marxist thought, but came into conflict with a socialist government.

## Looking beyond the proscenium arch

Given the standing of Brecht and the BE, it is extraordinary that the scholarly literature contains so little on this company. Christoph Funke provides a general overview of the BE's time at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in a book on the theatre building and the theatre-makers it hosted, rather than on the BE itself.[1] Petra Stuber features the BE in her insightful account of theatre in the GDR, but it is only one company amongst others.[2] John Fuegi's is the only book solely devoted to Brecht's practices as a director, but he actively de-politicizes them,[3] something against which I argue in the first four chapters of this study. Elsewhere directors and actors have written memoirs of their time with Brecht and/or the BE, and scholars have studied particular aspects of specific productions or directorial approaches. So, despite a number of useful and less useful forays, that will be cited in subsequent chapters, there has been no systematic investigation or examination of a much-celebrated theatre company whose work, practices and organization influenced theatre-makers around the world.

The aim of this study is to offer the kind of systematic investigation envisaged by Ric Knowles in which the performed event is not seen in

1 See Christoph Funke, 'Das Berliner Ensemble am Schiffbauerdamm 1954–1992', in Funke and Wolfgang Jansen, *Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. Die Geschichte einer Berliner Bühne* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 1992), pp. 165–207.
2 See Petra Stuber, *Spielräume und Grenzen: Studienzum DDR-Theater* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 1998).
3 See John Fuegi, *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos according to Plan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), particularly pp. 110–86.

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isolation, but as the intersection of many different and potentially conflicting interests.[4] I have chosen to start with the BE's theatre work, the method and the productions that made it famous, as a way of illuminating the many contexts and frames of reference that informed the company. In order to understand why its productions were so significant, one has both to look behind the scenes and to leave the theatre building. The BE's internal structures were subject to Brecht's revolutionary ideas, and these were reflected in the ensemble playing on stage. The repertoire, which was constructed for a socialist society, naturally originated in the BE, but had to be approved by state institutions, and so an ideological dimension was present on both sides of that equation. The BE's international profile also affected what it was and was not allowed to perform, and the SED also sought to influence the people who occupied strategic positions, both overtly through its officials and covertly through the recruitment of well-placed Stasi informers (although this practice only really started once Brecht was dead, and intensified in the wake of the Prague Spring of 1968). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the BE had to deal with a new set of social, political and economical contexts as it struggled to come to terms with the reunified, capitalist Germany.

Consequently, a contextualized study needs to deal with a variety of factors that manifested themselves on stage, in the rehearsal room, the BE's various departments, the byzantine structures of the SED, and the wider world. In short, the BE was a focal point for a number of forces, and it is only by engaging with these multifarious impulses that a rounded account may be given. The reader will thus find references to the BE's own rehearsal and production documentation, internal minutes and letters, theatre reviews, and a mass of communication to, from and within the SED, including its covert agency, the Stasi and, later, with the Berlin Senate, as well as interviews with some of the BE's most important associates.

## The scope of the study

This study is, broadly, a chronological one. The BE's history, however, includes a caesura that is worth identifying here. From 1949 until her death in 1971, Weigel was the BE's *Intendantin* (the feminine form of *Intendant*, 'general manager'). The years up to that point represent the 'Brecht phase': Brecht introduced and developed a method for making theatre that close collaborators continued and extended after his death.

[4] Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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While the method was to accompany production work after 1971, other ideas challenged 'orthodox' Brechtianism in the early 1970s, occasionally in the 1980s, and again in the 1990s. The years after Weigel's death thus represent the company's 'post-Brecht' phase. The study concludes in 1999, fifty years after the BE's founding. While I will dwell on that year as an end-point in the Conclusion, I merely note here that the new *Intendant*, Claus Peymann, sought to liberate himself and the company from Brecht's direct influence and thus his first productions in 2000 mark the end of the 'post-Brecht' phase.

The study is not only interested in how the BE, as an institution, developed over time. It is also concerned with the practical theatre work of Bertolt Brecht, an under-researched field for a practitioner so significant and well known. The first seven chapters of the book ask how Brecht reconciled his theoretical ideas and his practice over the course of many productions, and how these techniques and methods developed after his death. The second seven focus on the dissatisfaction with some of Brecht's approaches and the varying attempts to address them while retaining Brecht's dialectical worldview and his faith in the changeability of people and society.

The BE's history itself is a fascinating one, not only for the kinds of theatre that generated international attention, but also for the ways in which the BE's distinctiveness arose within the GDR. The history of the BE is also a history of the SED's cultural policies, its ability to implement them, and the sanctions it was and was not able to deploy with respect to its most prestigious cultural entity. The BE, of course, experienced the GDR's major crises, both in national and cultural-political terms. It sought to engage with the workers uprising of 17 June 1953 and lauded the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. It was also the victim of a witch-hunt in the early 1950s that obsessively sought out 'formalism' in the arts and was censured by the SED's XI Plenum of late 1965. The BE was a unique theatre in the history of the GDR, but it was also subjected to policies that affected the theatre system as a whole. As such, analysis of the BE can also comment on more general aspects of the authorities' cultural ambitions.

Readers will notice that the study is a necessarily compressed history, due to the amount of material available and the need to fashion it into a narrative that covers half a century replete with incident within and without the BE. There is also insufficient space to consider all the productions in the fifty seasons under discussion, but such exhaustive chronicling would not have been desirable, either. Instead, I have focused on both the productions that were received with much fanfare, as well as those that offer different perspectives on the BE's output. Readers may

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find that their favourite productions either do not appear or only serve as points of reference. I can only counter that I have attempted to offer a representative mix of theatrical work. As the reader may well expect, a study that aims to construct a new narrative of the company provides a selection that recognizes not only the BE's acknowledged achievements, but also lingers on some of the lesser-known projects that deserve greater attention.

There are also areas that have been deliberately neglected in order for the focus to remain on the distinctiveness of the BE's productions and the conditions under which this distinctiveness developed. For the most part, I have not considered the history of the BE's many tours, for example, and only concentrate on those to Paris and London in the mid 1950s that established the company internationally.[5] In addition, I note the problems the BE encountered when it could not travel abroad in the wake of the erection of the Berlin Wall. I also treat the productions themselves in terms of their rehearsal, original performances and reception, yet the BE continually returned to the productions, which could run for years at a time. The 'Abendberichte' ('evening reports'), often compiled by the company's assistants, bear witness to changes over the years, but the reader will have to be satisfied with the knowledge that this process took place rather than be initiated into the various stages of post-premiere development. Such a description would only be possible in individual accounts of particular productions. In addition, I have chosen to examine preparation, rehearsal, and performance rather than offer in-depth analyses of the plays themselves. Similarly, I have subordinated the music that accompanied the productions and innovations in scenography that ran alongside the development of the BE to the dynamics of acting and directing.[6] Again, these elements could provide material for complete studies in themselves.

The book opens with a chapter that considers the ways in which Brecht approached his new theatre company as an opportunity to implement ideas and ways of working that had occupied him during his exile from

[5] For a broader consideration, see David Barnett, 'The Politics of an International Reputation: The Berliner Ensemble as a GDR Theatre on Tour', in Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (eds.), *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming).

[6] For further discussions of both aspects, see, for example, Friedrich Dieckmann, 'Komponenten am Berliner Ensemble', in Dieckmann, *Die Freiheit – ein Augenblick: Texte aus vier Jahrzehnten*, ed. by Therese Hörnigk and Sebastian Kleinschmidt (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2002), pp. 85–95; Joachim Lucchesi and Ronald K. Schull, *Musik bei Brecht* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); Friedrich Dieckmann, *Karl von Appens Bühnenbilder am Berliner Ensemble: Szenenbilder, Figurinen, Entwürfe und Szenen photos zu achtzehn Aufführungen* (Berlin: Henschel, 1973).

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Germany. Chapter 2 examines the founding of the company, its first season as a case study of the varieties of performance work on offer, and the existential problems the BE faced before it was a year old. Chapters 3 and 4 consider Brecht's work with the BE and the political battles in which it found itself embroiled. Because the BE was Brecht's theatre and the early years establish the tone, parameters, and principles for the work in the decades to come, the study begins with a detailed examination of the period in which Brecht was artistic director. This provides the foundation for understanding the BE as the 'Brecht theatre' it became after his death. Brecht's spirit haunted the BE until the end of the 1990s: without an appreciation of how Brecht directed or envisaged the structures of the company, it may be difficult to fathom subsequent developments that both consciously and unconsciously took up or reacted against Brecht's influence. All subsequent chapters explore the way the BE operated under a most divergent group of leaders.

As is the case with any historical investigation, it would be impossible to tell the company's complete story. I have had to be selective, due to sheer volume of information available in the various archives, interviews and literature, but believe that any omissions do not fundamentally undermine the cumulative picture of the company that emerges over the chapters. The indefinite article in the study's title acknowledges this position from the outset. I hope that the reader will enjoy the breadth and the depth of the chapters without ruing the inevitable gaps, and that the history's richness will suggest a sense of the BE's remarkable achievements and the value they may have to theatre-makers and audiences today.

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# 1 The Berliner Ensemble as an opportunity to establish a new type of theatre

## Ambitions after exile

Bertolt Brecht left Germany and went into exile on 28 February 1933. He had been preparing for such an eventuality earlier that month, although the event that brought about his immediate departure was the blaze that gutted the seat of government, the Reichstag, the day before.[1] That the Nazis could undertake such an action to secure power was enough to tell Brecht, as a prominent critic of the party, that he was no longer safe in his homeland. He returned to Germany, via France and Switzerland, for the first time in late August 1948.

His fifteen years of exile offered him precious little contact with the theatre. His attempts to intervene in the New York production of *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*) in 1935 ended in chaos, and he was banned from attending rehearsals. In 1936, he participated more productively in rehearsals of his play *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe* (*Round Heads and Pointed Heads*) at the Theater Riddersalen in Copenhagen; he played a similar role in Parisian productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) and *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* (*Señora Carrar's Rifles*) in 1937. While in exile in the United States, he worked closely with the actor Charles Laughton on *Leben des Galilei* (*Life of Galileo*), and the production premiered in Beverly Hills under the direction of Joseph Losey in 1947. Brecht, who had directed several productions in the Weimar Republic, had not directed a single play during his exile.

Instead of working in the theatre, Brecht had been writing for and about it. Many of the plays on which Brecht's reputation as a dramatist rests were written in this period. His theoretical reflections on and aspirations for the theatre were also fashioned, thought through and developed away from a rehearsal room or an audience. He was certainly keen to have his unstaged plays produced in professional theatres, but, as their production histories show, it was neither his priority to launch them on

[1] See Werner Hecht, *Brecht Chronik 1898–1956* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 346 and 349.



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an unsuspecting public in quick succession after returning from exile nor to take directing credits exclusively for himself. Instead, he was far more concerned with implementing a series of reforms to the theatre as it existed at the time in order to change the nature of theatre-making itself. The years of exile had allowed Brecht to speculate on what a new theatre might look like and how it might function. Having tentatively moved back to Berlin in October 1948, Brecht formulated the idea of a establishing a permanent theatre company in December, although it would take a further five months and much negotiation with the East German authorities before the company was officially recognized and supported.

The advantages of such an entity were obvious. Brecht's plans for a new theatre could not be realized after productions in different theatres as a freelance director. A theatre company of his own could offer all the basic structures necessary for sustained practice and research: it would have regular access to rehearsal and performance facilities; a stable leadership to guide and nurture a creative team; an ensemble of actors to engage with novel modes of understanding their characters and fresh approaches to rehearsal; and a dedicated infrastructure to support the productions themselves. As it would turn out, this ideal state only came about once the Berliner Ensemble (BE) was finally given its own theatre buildings, over four years after its founding in September 1949. However, the establishment of a permanent company did offer Brecht an amount of stability, and with this he was able to bring about some remarkable changes to the processes of making theatre in a relatively short period.

Brecht's ideas for a new theatre, theorized in and, to an extent, prior to his exile can be understood in terms of the ways directors and actors rehearsed, their aims for performance, how a theatre is organized, and how labour might be divided in such an institution. This chapter explores the ways in which Brecht sought to reconcile his theoretical ambitions with the concrete reality of a theatre company.

## The director and the ensemble

Brecht's understanding of an ensemble was the product of the way he thought about the director's relationship with the actors. One of Brecht's concerns was the common belief that good directors came to the first rehearsal with a completely thought-through vision of the production, which would then be transmitted to the actors. This was a standard method of the time, one exemplified by one of the most innovative and well-respected German directors of the twentieth century, Max Reinhardt. He 'worked out all the details of a new production in his head

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long before rehearsals began' and noted them down in what he called his 'Regiebuch' ('directing book').[2] Brecht, on the other hand, argued that the director 'should insist that at any one time several solutions be considered'.[3] He proposed, in a radical departure from accepted practice, that the director and the cast work inductively on the dramatic material. The inductive process is predicated upon the movement from observation towards the tentative establishment of patterns and principles. As Antony Tatlow notes: 'in Brecht's open, inductive process, reality, like the work of art, is not given; it must be interpreted, engaged with, constructed, produced'.[4] The inductive method is one that is particularly well suited to the work of art, an object that strives to make connections from the often unexpected behaviour of different people in different situations. The inductive method of direction was thus one focused on discovery. In order to achieve this, Brecht sought to instil a naïve attitude both in himself and in the actors at the beginning of the rehearsal process: 'the correct starting point is the zero point'.[5] By approaching the contradictory impulses of a play without a definitive interpretation, the director *and* the actors could work together to discover how to perform the dramatic material.

The idea of 'togetherness' is closely tied to the concept of ensemble, yet Brecht's ideas on this diverged from those of his fellow directors around 1930:

> 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.[6]

Brecht recognized that rather than restricting the actors with misplaced deference to other cast members, he would do better to activate them all. Indeed, when working at the BE, he told an actor that a productive contradiction existed between the collective desire to stage a play and the individual actor's desire to represent his or her position: 'everything lives off this contradiction'.[7] Again, the director is not concerned with controlling the actors, but rather empowering them to make discoveries that can be used productively in performance.

[2] J. L. Styan, *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 120.
[3] Brecht, 'Haltung des Probenleiters (bei induktivem Vorgehen)', BFA, 22: 597; *BoT*, p. 212.
[4] Antony Tatlow, 'Bertolt Brecht Today: Problems in Aesthetics and Politics', in Tatlow and Tak-Wei Wong (eds.), *Brecht and East Asian Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1982), pp. 3–17 (13).
[5] Brecht, 'Über das Ansetzen des Nullpunktes', BFA, 22: 244; *BoT*, p. 161.
[6] Brecht, 'Über die Probenarbeit', BFA, 21: 388; *BoT*, p. 50.
[7] Brecht, 'Die Regie Bertolt Brechts', BFA, 23: 164; *BoP*, p. 228.

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