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Introduction

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On the cover of its issue of 11 February 1956, the German satirical journal *Simplicissimus* featured a cartoon depicting a circus tent, with Bertolt Brecht wearing a laurel wreath and sitting on a muzzled Pegasus. The ringmaster holding the horse's leash is Walter Ulbricht, then head of state of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In the caption he is ordering Brecht to compose a striking marching song for the new people's army. The cover, a wickedly malicious birthday present – Brecht had turned 58 the previous day – epitomized the Western view of his relationship to the Communist state. But the controversies surrounding Brecht were not limited to his ideological opponents. Half a year later the Marxist critic George Lukács delivered a speech at Brecht's funeral which was meant to lay controversies to rest. Aimed at reconciling Brecht's theories with Aristotle's concept of catharsis, a point upon which Brecht and he were diametrically opposed, Lukács's eulogy embodied yet another misunderstanding, typical of the many that occurred during Brecht's lifetime.

Three decades after Brecht's death his stature takes on increasingly mythic proportions, yet his reputation fails to reconcile either the critics of his own generation or those of the generation that followed him, who are approaching his work for the first time. But is not Brecht's entire *oeuvre* based on contradictions and on his desire to stir up controversy and doubt? One might even imagine the familiar smirk on Brecht's face as he contemplates from beyond the grave the continuation of these debates. The lively discussion at the International Theatre Festival and Conference, BRECHT: THIRTY YEARS AFTER (October 1986, Toronto, Canada), the International Symposium

BRECHT AND THE PARADIGM CHANGE (December 1986, Hong Kong, China), and the International Brecht Dialogue 88, ART AND THE ART OF LIVING (February 1988, Berlin, GDR) indeed demonstrate that interest in Brecht is still very much alive.

A glance at the *MLA International Bibliography*, and at the lists of newly published books on Brecht presented in *Communications*, the journal of the International Brecht Society, confirms this observation; it also illustrates the difficulty of keeping track of all publications on Brecht. Certain events or historical data, however, have triggered interest in specific areas. A spate of recent biographies and the opening of the FBI and CIA files on Brecht might be responsible for the fact that many critics have developed an unhealthy fascination with Brecht's private life. The thirtieth anniversary of his death in 1986 and his ninetieth birthday in 1988 provoked a re-evaluation of his theory and practice with a strong emphasis on Brecht the director, and prompted countries throughout the world to re-examine Brecht's relevance to the present.

The collection of essays in this book records material first introduced at the Conference BRECHT: THIRTY YEARS AFTER. Presented by some of the most prominent Brecht experts, including representatives from both East and West Germany, whose conflicting interpretations have not hitherto been gathered together in a single book, these analyses offer a unique opportunity to examine the differing views of Brecht's impact in various countries and in specific areas such as acting, directing, feminism, and film. It also tries to remedy some of the serious misunderstandings of the complex work of Brecht, caused by the fact that many critics have severed Brecht the playwright and poet from Brecht the theorist and theatre practitioner.

While the essays are grouped under certain rubrics, these groups do not represent divisions so much as complementary aspects of Brecht's work. The evaluation of Brecht's impact in his own country, the GDR, initiates the discussion. Manfred Wekwerth, who worked closely with Brecht and who since 1977 has been the Director of the Berliner Ensemble, the company founded by Brecht in 1949, is ideally suited to bridge the gap between theory and practice since he is himself both theoretician and practitioner. In dealing with certain Brechtian notions, Wekwerth attempts to establish Brecht's own

sense of them in 1956, thus restoring to a pristine meaning terms dimmed by three decades of misuse. Joachim Tenschert, a dramaturge with the Ensemble and a frequent co-director with Wekwerth, contributes an account of the development of the Berliner Ensemble after the death of Brecht. He invites us to consider whether Brecht's thesis that staging methods, interpretation of plays, and the structure of the repertoire must constantly change (since history itself is in a state of evolution) has been borne out in the work of his own company. Rolf Rohmer concludes the first section of the volume, which has been given over to representatives from East Germany, by analysing the importance of Brecht the playwright in his own country, and by examining the problems encountered by later playwrights faced with the difficulties of assimilating the influence of so overwhelming a predecessor.

Three broader studies of the importance of Brecht in the Federal Republic of Germany, in England, and in France succeed the first group. Klaus Völker, whose biography of Brecht was published in 1976, seems to concur with the general view held by theatre practitioners in the FRG that Brecht presented a simplified view of reality and that the closed form of his parables does not provide adequate opportunity for interpretative variety. However, John Willett and Bernard Dort agree that Brecht still has a living contribution to make to the theory and practice of the theatre, despite the differing reception of his work in England and in France.

As a further corrective to the long-prevailing overemphasis on Brecht's theoretical writings, the two sections that follow deal with specific aspects of Brecht's acting techniques and staging methods and with performance studies of two Brechtian productions – Benno Besson's *Hamlet* (1979) and the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Mother Courage* (1983). The object, however, has not been to present a unified view of Brecht's work. Rather, the opposing views on acting and blocking expressed by Martin Esslin and Maarten van Dijk, and on adaptations by Esslin and Paul Walsh, establish the dialectic that can be initiated between a generation of scholars contemporaneous with Brecht, and a new generation eager to investigate once more the practical implications of Brecht's methodology. To limit Brecht's impact strictly to the theatre, however, would be to do him an injustice: essays follow that examine his influence on

contemporary feminist writers and on film, on which he has made a profound impression. Eric Bentley concludes the volume by challenging one of the themes that has unified the collection of essays: the notion of influence.

All three contributors from the GDR, Manfred Wekwerth, Joachim Tenschert and Rolf Rohmer, suggest that the work of Brecht has to be reread, and re-interpreted for a society subjected to radically altered circumstances. Indeed, while Brecht wrote to increase self-recognition and to promote change in a capitalist society, the GDR is now faced with the realities of a socialist society. One can either argue that what has been achieved is the best of all possible societies, a *fait accompli*, or submit the new society to a Marxist analysis, which treats reality critically and reveals its contradictions. Choosing the latter alternative, Manfred Wekwerth poses seven questions about Brecht's key concerns: changing the world; *Gestus*; pleasure; reason; *naïveté*; distancing/identifying; breadth and diversity of realism. These terms are being redefined in the light of the changed social conditions in the GDR. It is a timely and salutary reminder that such controversial terms are themselves part of a process of change and re-evaluation, rather than a static shibboleth.

Identifying the phrase 'changing the world' as the main issue in Brecht's theatre, Wekwerth argues that Brecht's focus is particularly relevant to challenges posed by the scientific and technical revolution which society has to master. He bases his analysis on Marxist theory and refers to Brecht's concern with collectivity. The changes in the means and conditions of production in socialism enlarge the sphere of human possibilities. The recognition and resolution of individual differences in needs, abilities and pleasures not only 'lift the individual to universal status but also stabilize the collective', since, with that recognition and resolution, the possibility of the exchange of what the one individual needs for what the other produces increases. Wekwerth thus proposes as a reading of the phrase 'changing the world' (a reading which would be meaningful in a socialist society) the demonstration that the prerequisite for the free transformation of *all* is the free transformation of *each* individual.

But the free transformation of each individual is seen by Wekwerth in relation to the collective. This is precisely the point Heiner Müller challenges in plays like *Mauser* (1979). He believes that the subjection

of the individual to the collective might lead to the fossilization of the present *form* of the collective, particularly in a society like the GDR whose terms of socialism are now firmly established. Müller has proposed a dialectic between history and the individual, since, as Elizabeth Wright aptly argues, 'the historical necessity of obtaining the subject's consent (*Einverständnis* in Brecht's sense) clashes with the desire of the individual for emancipation, where the full realization of socialism is uncertain or impossible'.[1]

Rolf Rohmer elaborates on the problems that the younger generation of playwrights in the GDR faces in accepting Brecht's work. 'Concerned with present-day problems, with the complicated issues of contemporary social reality', these young people 'demonstrate a constant hope and desire for change'. They are 'interested in plays that deal with specific issues, with intense situations and conflicts, and which deal with these openly'. Clearly the use of the fable or parable, which entails distancing and generalization, does not fulfil this demand. After 1933, Rohmer argues, Brecht had to accommodate the various points of view and different understandings of tradition held by the anti-Fascist democratic United Front made up of the most diverse socio-political groupings. Their sole point of agreement was the fight against Fascism. Moreover, Brecht did not have the opportunity in exile to try out his plays on stage and test the audience's reaction. The result was the literarization of his theatre both in theory and practice. The price he paid for this was the upgrading of the importance of the fable. It was concentration on the use of the fable which effectively prevented Brecht from reworking his earlier plays. But the fundamental problem for younger playwrights is not the difficulty in revising Brecht's material, but the implicit nature of messages in the parable form. It is Brecht's form itself that they reject in their search for a more explicit and direct communication with the audience. Müller shares this view. In a conversation with the philosopher Wolfgang Heise, he characterizes Brecht's parables as extemely closed and calculated, and therefore difficult to break open. But, he argues, 'that's precisely what keeps plays alive for the theatre, that at one time one stratum is at the surface and then in another situation and in another generation, the next one comes to the surface.'[2] Only by such deconstruction can the text work again. Müller accuses Brecht of judging and theorizing

about his experience too quickly. What stays in the mind is not the experience but the judgement. In order to reveal the contradiction between 'judgement' and 'experience' one has to 'expose the essential reality [*Realitätskern*] of his [Brecht's] experience with experiences of today'.[3] Müller and Völker both see Brecht's *Fatzer* fragment as more suited for such a deconstruction, because it is 'an unfinished play, a play without solutions, a play which asks painful questions and is open to question' (Völker). Völker considers the production of the *Fatzer* adaptation by Heiner Müller, directed by Manfred Karge and Matthias Langhoff in Hamburg in 1978, more successful than the staging of Brecht's *Fatzer* fragment at the Berlin Schaubühne under the direction of Frank-Patrick Steckel in 1976. Despite his criticism of Steckel's production he maintains that the play 'deserves to be produced with all its contradictions'. It is interesting to note that the Berliner Ensemble produced the *Fatzer* fragment in Heiner Müller's adaptation to celebrate Brecht's ninetieth birthday (10 Feb. 1988), particularly since Völker claims that 'the experimental exploratory period of the Berliner Ensemble effectively ended with the 1964 production of *Coriolanus*'. Such a statement might be dismissed as just another West German prejudice. Yet John Willett, who notes that the West German theatres 'have gone off Brecht during the last decade or more', also argues that 'the East Germans (including the Berliner Ensemble itself) no longer have anything infectiously new to say about him'.

Joachim Tenschert rejects this opinion and asserts in his essay that the Berliner Ensemble constantly rereads and re-explores Brecht's work 'to find messages for the world of today and of the day to come'. Endorsing this trend, the production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (premièred 1976), which the Berliner Ensemble presented as part of the Toronto Conference as their North American début, indeed constituted a rethinking of the play and of its earlier staging by Brecht in 1954. The completely different set design – the revolve had been exchanged for a sloping stage – was probably physically as beautiful as von Appen's creation of 1954. The hard lesson, however, which Brecht taught the 1954 audience by clearly distinguishing the good from the bad, had been softened, even blurred. In that production the rigid expressions of the masks of Brecht's ironshirts showed the rigidity of people who have become unquestioning instruments of the

powerful, while Simon did not wear a mask; his face remained free, like Grusha's. The ironshirts of the 1976 production wore only nose make-up, exactly like Simon. They were more realistic and human and thus less rigid. Since there was no physical distinction between them and Simon, the audience could infer, rather like the three gods in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, that one needed only *one* good person to justify the existing world order. It was a rethinking of the play, but it was also a concession to the audience, and something of the seriousness of the parable was lost.

Völker is as critical of the Brecht scene in the FRG as he is of that in the GDR. He claims that the only West German *mises en scène* of Brecht's work worth discussing, after Peter Stein's famous production of *The Mother* (1970), are Manfred Karge's *The Mother* (1982), Alfred Kirchner's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1979) and his *Mother Courage* (1981) – all three staged in Bochum – and Jürgen Flimm's *Baal* in Cologne (1981). The common features shared by the Kirchner and Flimm productions are modern settings and direct references to contemporary political situations. Such 'strained topicality' in production methods, however, is one of the nine points John Willett makes in outlining the main obstacles, as he sees them, which have to be overcome to achieve a vital Brecht in Great Britain. 'Those directors', he continues, 'who are frightened that Brecht's political message isn't topical enough for today often try to work in "contemporary" references in the form of slide projections or video material or even changes of text and setting. In our country, where the German experience between 1919 and 1945 has uncomfortable lessons for us, this blurs Brecht's point. As with Shakespeare, either the man has something to say to us or he hasn't; and you can't improve matters by dressing the play up differently.' Manfred Wekwerth also takes a stand on this subject in his section on 'reason' by declaring it 'nonsensical' to adapt plays to the most recent stage of historical understanding, for the basic assumption would be diametrically opposed to Brecht's concept of 'historicizing'. He shares Brecht's confidence in the intelligence of the spectator and believes that the stories 'in their historical and poetic concreteness . . . can be transferred by the audience to other times and situations'.

The post-Brecht theatre practitioners of West Germany seem to have as little confidence in the thinking ability of their public as the

East German ones, and both share a common goal of more direct communication. At least in the GDR there is a reaction to Brecht. In the FRG and France one hears only of a Brecht-fatigue (Brecht-*Müdigkeit*). Völker explains that Western artists and intellectuals 'retreat into more private and aesthetic domains with the general failure of political hopes and ambitions'. They consider Brecht now as much a classic as Goethe and Schiller. 'The Brecht-fatigue', comments Werner Hecht, the director of the Brecht-Zentrum in the GDR in his 1988 article 'Wie mit einem Klassiker umgehen?', 'is connected with a Western theory-fatigue in general, which not coincidentally also manifests itself in a general Marxism-fatigue.'[4] This not only agrees with the view of Völker, but is underlined by Bernard Dort. On the one hand it seems to be natural that the generations after Brecht reject his example in order to define their own position, even while always using Brecht as a reference point. On the other hand Brecht's reception in both Germanys has always fluctuated with the current political climate. The conservatism in the FRG and the Glasnost phase in the GDR, which openly permits the search for forms adequate for a new social order, confirm this trend. There is, however, another stumbling block which discourages theatre directors from taking on the challenge of re-assessing Brecht. Peter von Becker points out in his article 'Wer hat das Recht am Brecht?' the enormous problems of getting permission from Brecht's publishers and heirs to stage Brecht in any revisionary form.[5] The required guarantee of *Werktreue* (faithfulness to the text) prevents precisely those stagings which break the play open in order to bring layers to the surface that were hidden at the time they were written: the prerequisite, according to Müller, for keeping the plays alive. Brecht himself always considered his epic plays as a transitional form which had to be challenged and changed in order to remain continuously subversive.

According to Bernard Dort's essay, the decline of interest in Brecht within French theatre circles parallels that of their West German colleagues. He also sees this as a 'result of the cultural climate and of changes in ideology. One can speak of the return of repression, the repression that has occurred since this theatre first put to the fore its civic, political, and even revolutionary mission.' He blames the entire French intellectual climate. There is a connection to be found between the mistrust of the East and West German theatre people in

their audiences' abilities to judge for themselves, and Dort's description of the present situation as a 'rejection of the idea that thought is capable of changing the world'. Even Giorgio Strehler, whom Brecht once hailed as the best possible director for his plays, seems to have lost the ability to present Brecht in a revolutionary way that would instigate in the spectator the desire for knowledge and the pleasure of discovery. His third production of *The Threepenny Opera* (1986) was aesthetically extremely beautiful, but this beautiful extravaganza, and the reliance on established theatrical devices, robbed the play of any true political potential. Dort attributes the failure of Strehler's staging to two factors: firstly, that the director dealt with it as if it were a classic – though it is not yet a classic and Dort questions whether it will ever be one; and secondly, that Strehler presented the work as if it were self-sufficient and 'had only to be true to itself'. The failure of Strehler's *The Threepenny Opera* is, however, a question of staging and not of text. A concert given by Sting and Gianna Nanini in Hamburg in 1987 in which they sang songs from *The Threepenny Opera* was able to evoke a sharp political edge through their unorthodox and fresh way of presenting the texts, which brought out that excitement and pleasure combined with political awareness for which Brecht had hoped. Sting's interesting approach seems to echo Willett's account of the present Brecht reception in England, where there is 'no falling-off in the volume of productions' even though the same wave of political conservatism found in France and the FRG swept over the United Kingdom. On the contrary, the productions have 'meanwhile so improved (on the whole) as to persuade even the sceptic that our theatre is now able to make something of Brecht'. Willett believes that Brecht is now being seen in England 'as a direct riposte to the each-man-for-himself, weakest-goes-to-the-wall ethic of Mrs Thatcher's sub-Reagan government'.

Like Tenschert, Völker and Dort, Willett too refers to Max Frisch's remark about Brecht being reduced to a classic, and declares this idea to be 'patent rubbish'. He explains the specific attitude towards Brecht in Britain by identifying Brecht's ups and downs less as 'changes in his reputation and theatrical status' than 'changes in our grasp of his achievement. In Britain he has always been both seminal and boring depending on how he is presented and

understood; and what goes up and down (but on the whole more up) is our ability to understand and present him'.

Despite the differing analyses given by Dort and Willett, they see their respective theatres threatened by the same dangers: particularly by what Willett calls 'self-importance', and Dort calls 'narcissism'. The famous Brechtian theory of ensemble work has yet to replace the traditional ego trips, whether in acting, directing, or design.

Both share the opinion that neither France nor Britain is yet able to convey the full impact of Brecht's work. Dort considers it necessary to come to terms 'if not with the totality of his work then at least with fragments or selected moments from them', with 'his concept and practice of the theatre, and a general idea of its function'. Willett speculates that poetry, music and design provide keys for a deeper understanding of Brecht. 'There are poems of Brecht's', he states, 'which encapsulate so much, and move so economically from the small specific object to the great human issues, that they are almost unbearable to read aloud. This is where the study of his deeper relevance for our own time has to begin.' The newly published East German discs, featuring the performances of Hanns Eisler himself, Robyn Archer's recordings made for EMI with Muldowney, John Harle and the London Sinfonietta, and David Bowie's RCA record of five songs from *Baal* bring, Willett says, 'the most vivid and attractive part of Brecht's theatre out of the special realm of Berlin exotica, making it relevant rather to our own musical and poetic concerns'. The incorporation of music in plays has to be dealt with thoughtfully, however. The failure of the 1983 RSC production of *Mother Courage*, directed by Howard Davies, is attributed by Maarten van Dijk in part to George Fenton's musical score, which 'aimed for atmosphere instead of meaning', making the songs a 'seamless part of the action'. In contrast the Théâtre du Soleil's use of music in its highly successful production of Hélène Cixous's *Sihanouk* was in full sympathy with Brecht's practice (Dort).

Dort also praises Ariane Mnouchkine's direction of *Sihanouk* for exemplifying the Brechtian style of acting, through which the actors presented 'a series of comportments, which might be contradictory' instead of constructing a character. 'Sihanouk . . . could at one moment be as playful and light hearted as a comedian in the silent cinema, and at the next he could be as contorted and self-absorbed as