

BERTOLT BRECHT IN CONTEXT

Bertolt Brecht in Context examines Brecht's significance and contributions as a writer and the most influential playwright of the twentieth century. It explores the specific context from which Brecht emerged in imperial Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as his response to the turbulent German history of the twentieth century: World Wars I and II, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship, the experience of exile, and ultimately the division of Germany into two competing political blocs divided by the postwar Iron Curtain. Throughout this turbulence, and in spite of it, Brecht managed to remain extraordinarily productive, revolutionizing the theater of the twentieth century and developing a new approach to language and performance. Because of his unparalleled radicalism and influence, Brecht remains controversial to this day. This book – with a Preface by Mark Ravenhill – lays out in clear and accessible language the shape of Brecht's contribution and the reasons for his ongoing influence.

STEPHEN BROCKMANN is Professor of German at Carnegie Mellon University and has served as president of the International Brecht Society since 2014. From 2002 to 2007 he was the managing editor of *The Brecht Yearbook*, and in 2011–2012 he was the president of the German Studies Association.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42646-6 — Bertolt Brecht in Context
Edited by Stephen Brockmann
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EDITED BY
STEPHEN BROCKMANN
Carnegie Mellon University, Pennsylvania



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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108426466
DOI: 10.1017/9781108608800

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First published 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Brockmann, Stephen, editor.

TITLE: Bertolt Brecht in context / edited by Stephen Brockmann.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2021. | Series: Literature in context | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2021004947 (print) | LCCN 2021004948 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108426466 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108608800 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Brecht, Bertolt, 1898–1956 – Criticism and interpretation.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PT2603.R397 Z5644 2021 (print) | LCC PT2603.R397 (ebook) | DDC 832/.912–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021004947>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021004948>

ISBN 978-1-108-42646-6 Hardback

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21.1 Brecht's Bible in Martin Luther's translation and with a sitting Buddha pasted in on the left side. *page 188*

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-mans-land.org/article/meenie-moanie-meep-sappho-turns-her-back-after-the-big-race-curtains-for-me-vulture-circles-eternal-making-scenes/.

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Chronology

- 1898 Brecht is born in Augsburg
- 1914 World War I begins. Brecht gets his start as a writer.
- 1917 Brecht enrolls as a medical student at the University of Munich.
- 1918 Brecht serves as a medical orderly in Augsburg. World War I ends with a German surrender. Brecht witnesses the revolution in Bavaria first-hand.
- 1919 Brecht writes *Baal* and becomes active in Munich cultural life. Paula Banholzer bears, out of wedlock, Brecht's first son, Frank.
- 1920 Brecht's mother dies.
- 1922 *Drums in the Night* opens in Munich. Brecht receives the prestigious Kleist Prize and marries the opera singer Marianne Zoff.
- 1923 Germany's hyperinflation. *In the Jungle of the Cities* opens in Munich; *Baal* opens in Leipzig. Brecht's daughter Hanne is born to Marianne Zoff.
- 1924 Brecht moves to Berlin and becomes an integral part of cultural life. He meets Helene Weigel, who gives birth to his son Stefan. He also begins work with Elisabeth Hauptmann.
- 1926 *Man Equals Man* opens in Darmstadt. Brecht begins studying Marxism.
- 1927 Brecht's first poetry collection, *Domestic Breviary*, is published. Brecht starts his collaboration with Kurt Weill and also works with revolutionary theater practitioner Erwin Piscator. In the same year, he meets the composer Hanns Eisler at the Baden-Baden Music Festival; this marks the beginning of a lifelong collaboration between the two men. Brecht divorces Marianne Zoff.
- 1928 *The Threepenny Opera* opens in Berlin and becomes a massive success, making Brecht rich and famous.
- 1929 Onset of the Great Depression. Brecht's theater work becomes increasingly radical politically and aesthetically, as he moves

Chronology

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- toward the *Lehrstück* (learning play). He marries Helene Weigel; writes *St. Joan of the Stockyards*.
- 1930 The opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* opens in Leipzig and is picketed by Nazis, creating one of the Weimar Republic's major theater scandals. Brecht writes the learning play *The Decision*, with music by Eisler. Brecht's daughter Barbara is born to Helene Weigel.
- 1931 Brecht directs *Man Equals Man* (starring Peter Lorre) in Berlin. He sues Nero Film for breach of contract in creating the film *Threepenny Opera* by G. W. Pabst.
- 1932 Brecht and the filmmaker Slatan Dudow create the film *Kuhle Wampe*, a radical aesthetic and political experiment; the music for the film is composed by Hanns Eisler.
- 1933 Adolf Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany and the Nazi dictatorship begins. Brecht flees Germany with his family, ultimately settling in Svendborg, Denmark. *The Seven Deadly Sins* opens in Paris and travels to London.
- 1934 Brecht works on *Threepenny Novel*.
- 1935 On a trip to Moscow Brecht meets the radical artists Sergei Tretyakov and Sergei Eisenstein. He witnesses a performance by the Chinese actor Mei Lanfang. Brecht also travels for the first time to the United States. He begins writing *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*.
- 1937 Brecht travels to Paris for the second Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, a major gathering of anti-Nazi intellectuals and writers. Brecht's anti-Franco one-act play *Señora Carrar's Rifles* is performed in Paris, directed by Slatan Dudow and starring Helene Weigel.
- 1938 Germany annexes Austria. Eight scenes from *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* are performed in Paris. Brecht completes the first version of *Life of Galileo*; he also completes most of the work for his collection *Svendborg Poems*.
- 1939 World War II begins with Germany's attack on Poland. The *Svendborg Poems* are published. Brecht and his family are forced to leave Denmark. They go to Sweden. Brecht's father dies. Brecht completes *Mother Courage and Her Children*.
- 1940 Forced to flee even farther from the Nazis, Brecht and his family move to Finland. Brecht writes *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti*, and *Refugee Conversations*.

- 1941 In an epic journey to escape the Nazis, Brecht and his family travel through the Soviet Union to Vladivostok, where they board a ship headed for California. Shortly after Brecht leaves the USSR, Germany invades the USSR. Brecht meets Fritz Lang in Hollywood and begins work on *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. He also begins to write the *Hollywood Elegies*, and Hanns Eisler starts composing music for them.
- 1942 Brecht works on the screenplay for Fritz Lang's anti-Nazi film *Hangmen Also Die!*
- 1943 Brecht writes *Schweyk in the Second World War*; he also travels to New York, where he meets key intellectuals such as Ernst Bloch, W. H. Auden, and George Grosz.
- 1944 Brecht completes *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Together with W. H. Auden, he works on an adaptation of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.
- 1945 World War II in Europe ends with the defeat of Germany and Hitler's suicide. The atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the war in Japan as well.
- 1947 *Life of Galileo* opens in Los Angeles, starring Charles Laughton. Brecht is interrogated in Washington, DC by the House Un-American Activities Committee. The following day, he leaves the United States for Switzerland.
- 1948 Brecht's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, starring Helene Weigel and directed by Brecht and his friend Caspar Neher, is staged in Switzerland. Brecht travels to Berlin to work on a production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Brecht writes the "Short Organon for the Theatre."
- 1949 *Mother Courage and Her Children*, starring Helene Weigel, opens at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, launching Brecht's postwar theater career. The music for the play is written by Paul Dessau. Brecht and Weigel create the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht completes *The Days of the Commune* and publishes *Tales from the Calendar*. The Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, the two postwar German states, are founded. *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti* opens at the Deutsches Theater to tremendous acclaim toward the end of the year. The Academy of the Arts is created in East Berlin, and its journal *Sinn und Form* devotes an entire issue to Brecht. This issue includes the first publication of Brecht's theoretical treatise "Short Organon for the Theatre."

Chronology

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- 1950 Brecht prepares and directs an adaptation of J. M. R. Lenz's eighteenth-century play *The Tutor*, a stinging criticism of German intellectual traditions.
- 1951 A major controversy erupts in East Berlin around Brecht's collaboration with the composer Paul Dessau on *The Trial of Lucullus*, a modernist antiwar opera. Brecht and Dessau are accused of formalism. Brecht makes changes, and the title becomes *The Condemnation of Lucullus*.
- 1953 Workers' uprising in East Berlin, the first major uprising in the Eastern bloc. Behind the scenes Brecht works to liberalize cultural life in the GDR. Brecht writes the *Buckow Elegies* and *Turandot or the Whitewashers' Congress*. The latter is another critique of intellectual slavishness.
- 1954 The Berliner Ensemble moves to the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. The Berliner Ensemble takes *Mother Courage and Her Children* to Paris, where it creates an international sensation.
- 1955 The Berliner Ensemble travels to Paris for the second time, this time with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.
- 1956 Brecht demands the liberalization of East German cultural life at the January writers' congress in Berlin. In February Nikita Khrushchev denounces Stalin's crimes and the cult of personality in the USSR. Brecht dies in August shortly after working on translations of Polish anti-Stalinist poems. The year ends with the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by the Soviets and a cultural and political crackdown in East Germany. Walter Ulbricht, the East German leader who had distrusted Brecht during his lifetime, eulogizes Brecht in a public commemoration at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, launching the East German establishment's decades-long and largely successful attempt to co-opt Brecht and his memory for their own purposes.

Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
APO	Extra-Parliamentary Opposition (West Germany)
BBA	Bertolt Brecht Archive
BBB	<i>Die Bibliothek Bertolt Brechts: Ein kommentiertes Verzeichnis</i>
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BE	Berliner Ensemble
BFA	Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe [standard German edition of Brecht's complete works]
BFR	<i>Brecht on Film and Radio</i>
BoP	<i>Brecht on Performance</i>
BoT	<i>Brecht on Theatre</i>
BPT	Bantu People's Theatre
CP	<i>Collected Plays</i> [standard English edition of Brecht's plays]
CPBB	<i>The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht</i>
CPC	Popular Culture Center
DDR	German Democratic Republic
DEFA	Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (East German film company)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
JACT	Junction Avenue Theatre Company
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
NT	National Theatre (London)
PACT	Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SED	Socialist Unity Party (of East Germany)
TO	Theatre of the Oppressed

List of Abbreviations

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TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USPD	Independent Social Democratic Party
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Preface

In 1982, I entered a sixth-form college in Chichester in the south of England. I was there to study for my A levels, national exams most typically taken at the age of eighteen and that are the entry point to university in the United Kingdom. On my first day, I was told that the college was now offering a brand-new A level subject: Theatre Studies. To date, any study of theater leading to an exam at eighteen had been restricted to plays read as part of the English syllabus. With my enthusiasm for acting, it would be a good idea, it was suggested, if I signed up for Theatre Studies. With great excitement, I did.

The new Theatre Studies course was a sometimes-confused meeting point of different strands in late twentieth-century theater pedagogy. Several plays were to be studied and written about in a way that owed much to the study of English literature. But students were also expected to devise a group performance with only a light guiding hand from a teacher. It was as though F. R. Leavis and the Living Theatre each had a hand in structuring our course of study.

A third element of the course was a written paper. This was called Theoretical Practitioners and it was here that I had my first encounter with Brecht. Heavily influenced, I think, by their citation in Peter Brook's 1968 *The Empty Space*, the exam board had chosen four theoretical practitioners for us to study: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski. As this was the first time these "great figures" were to be studied by anyone so young, there were no published guides or introductions. Students and teachers bought copies of translations of *Towards A Poor Theatre*, *An Actor Prepares*, and *Brecht on Theatre*, and we sat and read them with confusion that quickly became boredom.

With something like ten hours of teaching time devoted to Brecht, we focused most of our energies on Willett's translation of Brecht's essay about *Mahagonny*. This provided a handy checklist of differences between the dramatic theater and the epic theater and was perfect exam material.

Without having read or seen any play, film, or poem of Brecht's, a generation of young Brits could now dutifully deliver a thousand words on the "alienation effect."

The reading list I was sent before I turned up at Bristol University in 1984 duplicated much of the material we'd already studied at sixth form. We were required to read one Brecht play – a rather idiosyncratic choice: *The Mother*. In a department that prided itself on its utilization of Marxist aesthetics, this was the Brecht play that was considered the most politically "pure." It had been cited by John McGrath in his *A Good Night Out* and was seen as a model of the new politically committed theater that much of the teaching staff believed was needed in a year in which Margaret Thatcher was at war with the union movement. I read the play without any great enthusiasm, although it was interesting to see finally how some of the theory we'd studied for A level might inform the writing of a play.

In my second year of university, I heard that the drama society were looking for a director of a production of *The Threepenny Opera* and decided – without knowing the piece – that it should be me. Listening first to a recording of the songs in German and then reading the Methuen edition of the play, I was amazed to discover a sardonic, sensuous voice that swung thrillingly between irony and anger. The political line of the piece was deliciously "impure" – there was the odd flash of Marxism but it was overwhelmed by a bracing nihilism. I was part of an emerging – but not yet identified – Generation X sensibility. A view of the world that was later to be realized in *American Psycho* and *Reservoir Dogs*. It was this sensibility that I found voiced for the first time in *The Threepenny Opera*.

From then on I wandered gleefully "off syllabus" to read any Brecht I could find in translation, to Wedekind, Büchner, Kaiser, Toller, to the operas of Alban Berg, to Robyn Archer's recordings of Eisler. I'd discovered a rich seam that inspired me, as I left university behind, to make my own theater.

As this fascinating collection of essays demonstrates, there are a multitude of Brechts. Some of them speak to some of us, some of them speak to others, perhaps some have had their day, perhaps some have not yet found their moment. Brecht can be a bully, a teacher, a seducer, a teller of tall tales, an eternal shapeshifter. Any attempt to create a monolith will only shatter the pieces all over again. Creative destruction. Which is, I would suggest, a good thing.

MARK RAVENHILL
 June 2020

A Note on Brecht in English

There are more published versions of Brecht's major plays in English than there are in German, and the editorial situation is somewhat opaque for ordinary readers. In the United States, translations by Eric Bentley tend to be popular, whereas in the United Kingdom the preferred translations tend to be by John Willett and his associates, published almost entirely by Methuen, while many of Bentley's are published by Grove Atlantic. There are historical reasons for these divergences: Brecht worked directly with Bentley when he was in the United States and gave him permission to translate his plays into English for the US market. That legal situation did not obtain for other English-speaking markets, however, especially for the United Kingdom.

In addition to the translations by Bentley and Willett, there are many other translations of Brecht's plays. For instance Mark Blitzstein's adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* became a huge success in the United States in the 1950s, and more recently Tony Kushner's and Wendy Arons's translation of *The Good Person of Szechwan* has been performed successfully around the United States. Meanwhile, David Hare's translation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Mark Ravenhill's of *Life of Galileo* have pleased audiences in the United Kingdom. The International Brecht Society maintains a web archive of Brecht translations into English with well over four thousand entries: brechtguide.library.wisc.edu/.

Whereas the Brecht heirs in Germany tended to keep a tight rein on Brecht performances and publications in the German-speaking world, they were not as strict in their approach to the English-speaking world. For this reason directors, producers, adapters, and dramaturges in the English-speaking world have generally enjoyed more freedom to change Brecht's texts around, adapt them, and even make them say whatever they want – as, for instance, in the 2016 staging of *The Threepenny Opera* at London's National Theatre. One can bemoan such freedom or celebrate it, but it does constitute a distinct difference between the English- and the German-speaking worlds vis-à-vis Brecht productions. On the other hand, state-

subsidized theaters in Germany and Austria are frequently able to take greater risks (including the risk of offending their audiences) than many theaters in the United States or United Kingdom that may depend heavily on corporate support and ticket sales.

For the sake of consistency, wherever possible this book cites Brecht's plays from the most recent English edition of the *Collected Plays* initiated by John Willett, finished by Tom Kuhn, and published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. We also cite, where possible, from the Bloomsbury Methuen editions of *Brecht on Theatre* and *Brecht on Performance*, as well as from other recent Bloomsbury Methuen editions. Where no such edition exists (as with, for instance, the *Stories of Mr. Keuner* or the *Threepenny Novel*), we cite from whatever edition is conveniently available.

The German-speaking world in general has more time, patience, and money for critical editions than the English-speaking world, and this situation applies to Brecht as well. Whereas in German there exists a standard critical edition of Brecht's works, the Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe (BFA), there is no such edition in English. The closest approximation is the series of Brecht volumes published by Bloomsbury Methuen and now supervised by Tom Kuhn at the University of Oxford.

The most authoritative source for Brecht's poetry in English is Tom Kuhn's and David Constantine's *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, published by Liveright in 2019. However, the previous English-language edition of Brecht's poetry, *Collected Poems 1913–1956*, edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim and published in 1976, remains useful for those who may be looking for alternative translations or for the occasional poem not included in the most recent collection.

It is still the case that by no means all of Brecht's works are available in English-language translation. Works unpublished in English include some of Brecht's earliest plays and also more than a few poems. Moreover, in German there are sometimes multiple versions and stages of particular plays written, revised, and produced by Brecht and his team. English versions and editions often tend to overlook or ignore the work-in-progress quality of almost every play Brecht wrote and to present his works as definitive and final. *Brecht and the Writer's Workshop: Fatzer and Other Dramatic Projects*, edited by Tom Kuhn and Charlotte Ryland and published in 2019, is a praiseworthy exception that gives a sense of the intensely processual and also collaborative nature of Brecht's approach to writing plays.