4 Bertolt Brecht

Life and work

Bertolt Brecht (or 'Bert Brecht', as he liked to style himself) was born in Augsburg, Bavaria, on 10 February 1898. He was christened Eugen Berthold Friedrich, and his father was a Catholic, while his mother was Protestant. The father, 'a typical representative of the solid and respectable

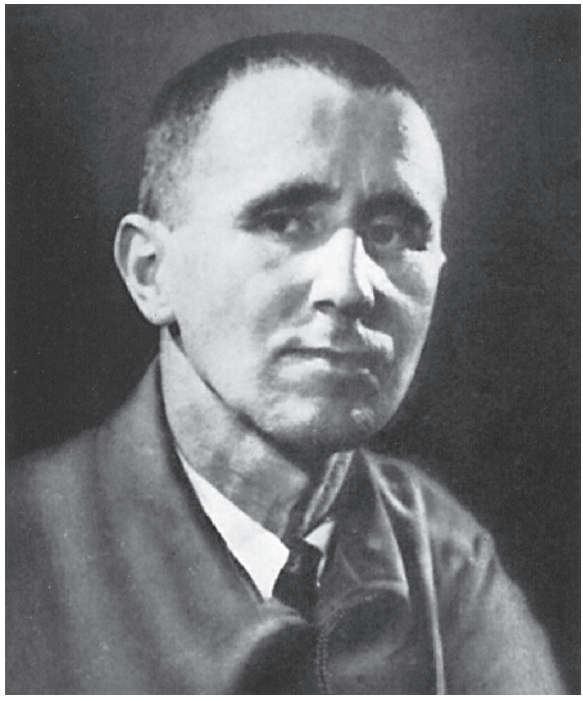

Figure 4.1 Bertolt Brecht.

bourgeoisie',[1] worked in the Haindl paper factory, and became a director there in 1914. Brecht and his father occasionally quarrelled – Brecht recorded in his diary in September 1920 that after some apples had been stolen from the family orchard he defended the thief, maintaining a tree's produce could not be private property. His father flew into a rage, accusing him of communism and shouting that his literary work amounted to nothing. But usually he took pride in his son, and supported him financially for many years. Brecht's mother, who died in 1920, dreamed of her son becoming a great poet. He in turn clearly loved her: his friend Hanns Otto Munsterer claims that the women in Brecht's later plays can only be fully appreciated when his adoration of his mother is understood. Brecht also had a younger brother, Walter, whose attitude to his famous elder brother seems to have been at best ambiguous, perhaps a mixture of jealousy, mistrust, and admiration.

When the First World War broke out, Brecht was at school. He sighed later that he had been 'lulled to sleep' for nine years there, and had therefore been unable to teach his teachers much,[2] but he had founded a school magazine, performed in his own puppet theatre and had begun to attend the theatre proper in Augsburg. When the war came, like many others he was proudly patriotic, though he later modified this attitude, and when the time came for him to join up, his father did all he could to prevent it. By 1918, however, he had become a medical orderly, a post he described with high humour later to his friend, Sergei Tretyakov:

> I bound up wounds and painted them with iodine, I administered enemas and gave blood transfusions. If a doctor had said to me: 'Brecht, amputate this leg!' I would have replied: 'As you order, Herr Staff Doctor!' and cut off the leg. If somebody had given the order: 'Brecht, trepan!' then I would have cut open the skull and poked about in the brain.[3]

From this time, too, came his *Legend of the Dead Soldier*, a poem which describes how a dead soldier is patched up and marched back to the front.

This is the work of a 'poète maudit', who 'wallowed in' Rimbaud,[4] and mourned Frank Wedekind as 'ugly, brutal [and] dangerous,' when he died in March 1918. The following summer Brecht and a friend spent weeks rambling through the Bavarian countryside, earning their board and lodging by entertaining the customers in wayside inns, as often as not hiking through the night or sleeping rough under the stars. To Arnold Zweig, Brecht was 'a descendant of the folk singers, [and] the unknown poets of the open road'.[5] For two or three summers after the end of the First World War,

> on hot afternoons [Brecht and his friends] would go swimming in the Hahnreibach, lie naked in the Wolfsahn meadow, or go climbing trees . . . Brecht recited funeral orations and devotions . . . so grotesque that we doubled up with laughter and rolled around in the reeds. The next day provoked philosophical musings.[6]

These probably took place in Brecht's attic room. His parents had allowed him the top floor of their house, which had its own entrance, and here the young would-be writer played host to young ladies as well as to his men friends, composed his earliest ballads, and began drafting plays and poems, usually in company with one or more of his delighted and supportive companions.

He also loved the local fairs. 'I keep on spending my evenings mooching around the *Plarrer*', he notes in his diary, 'where they hammer their nigger minstrel tunes into you till you can't get them out of the creases of your skin'.[7] Brecht also liked the ice cream parlour, where he could flirt with the waitresses and sing his ballads to his own accompaniment, the 'Lachkeller', a pub with entertainment where he met and performed with the comedian, Karl Valentin, and the Blumensale Theatre, where Valentin also appeared. Here the audience sat at tables, the more conveniently to smoke and drink during the acts, which often contained pungent political comment. In these idyllic years, Brecht also discovered love and (not quite the same thing) sex. Throughout his life, his affairs were multifarious, complex, and usually destructive. Like Shakespeare, Wagner, and many other geniuses, his treatment of his lovers was too often disgraceful, especially, as Peter Thomson has pointed out, for one who wrote so often about 'goodness' (though it should be added that *The Good Person of Szechuan*, for instance, is not about 'goodness' in people, but 'not-goodness' in society).

His first great love was Paula Banholzer, 'Bi'. 'A queen is a queen, terror is terror, and Bi is Bi', Brecht wrote, and, when she was naked, he thought her naive as a child and artful as a (film) star. In summer 1918 they became lovers, greatly to their mutual delight, but soon Bi became pregnant, and Frank, Brecht's first child, was born on 31 July 1919. He was cared for largely by foster parents, neither his father nor mother spending much time with him, and ironically when he grew up he was conscripted into Hitler's armed forces and killed in November 1943. Bi and Brecht continued as lovers, but gradually became less passionate, though he remained possessive, and even dedicated *Drums in the Night* to her in 1922. Nevertheless, by then he was involved with other women, most notably Marianne Zoff, an Austrian opera singer, with whom he was living in

Munich in March 1921. She too became pregnant, and despite his diary note – 'I can't get married. I must have elbowroom, be able to spit as I want, to sleep alone, be unscrupulous'[8] – in November 1922 they were married, four months before their daughter, Hanne, was born.

Brecht the young man was a fascinating, charismatic mass of contradictions: a shabby provincial, who yet seemed worldly wise, a wildly romantic cynic, someone who was frequently ill, yet whom many remembered as laughing with gusto, and inspiring laughter in others. He noted in his diary in August 1920: 'I'm continually forgetting my opinions, [and] can't ever make up my mind to learn them off by heart'.[9] In October 1921 he derided Wagner ('Enough to make you sick') one day, and lauded Charlie Chaplin ('The most profoundly moving thing I've ever seen in the cinema') the next.[10]

By then Brecht was working strenuously at becoming a writer. Determinedly, he sought a publisher, or publishers, for his work, which included poems and ballads, short stories, and plays, both full-length and one-act. He shoved typescripts into the hands of those higher on the ladder than himself, such as Lion Feuchtwanger, and gradually he began to make progress. He wrote theatre criticism for the local newspaper, a short story appeared in print, he was offered some directing work, and in 1922 his second play, *Drums in the Night*, was performed successfully at the Munich Kammerspiele. It was published, too, in a volume with the earlier *Baal*, and he was taken onto the staff of the theatre. In November that year Brecht was awarded the prestigious Kleist Prize: recognition that he was a significant new talent in the German theatre. The following year, *Baal* and his third play, *In the Jungle of Cities*, were both produced, and Brecht received, jointly with Lion Feuchtwanger, a commission to adapt Marlowe's *Edward II* for the Kammerspiele. Brecht himself directed it in March 1924 – his first successfully completed professional production. And six months later he moved to Berlin, to take up a post as dramaturg at Reinhardt's Deutsches Theatre.

Now was formed the persona of Brecht the Berliner: combative, sexy, and unpredictable, who was associated equally with 'new drama' and scandal. The artist Wieland Herzfelde remembered 'a very argumentative, very polished, and even sharp-tongued person. He had a passion . . . for saying things which shocked'. Arnold Bronnen described Brecht's 'bristly wan face with piercing button-eyes, and unruly bush of short dark hair . . . A pair of cheap wire spectacles dangled loosely from his remarkably delicate ears and hung across his narrow pointed nose. His mouth was peculiarly fine, and seemed to hold the dreams which others hold in their eyes.'[11]

Brecht's Berlin

Berlin enjoyed an economic boom between 1925 and 1929. The First World War years had been desperate in the city, and the immediate aftermath almost as bad, with political assassinations – from Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1918 to Walter Rathenau in 1922 – political rebellion – the Spartacists rising in 1918, the Kapp putsch in 1922 – and inflation, which saw the mark's value against the dollar spiral from 4.2 to 4.2 billion.

From 1925, rising personal incomes and comparative political stability produced a frenetic 'Babylon' of delights: six-day bicycle races, non-stop dance marathons, free body culture (which encouraged nude dancing), and cabarets with strippers and honky-tonk pianos, or, at less sleazy venues, the vicious satirical poems and songs of Erich Kastner, Walter Mehring, and Kurt Tucholsky. Duke Ellington's *Chocolate Kiddies* jazz review was the hit of 1925.

Serious music and theatre also flourished. Directors like Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner, and Erwin Piscator presented stunningly original productions, starring actors like Elizabeth Bergner, Tilla Durrieux, Max Pallenberg, and Alexander Moissi. They were matched by glamorous film stars – Marlene Dietrich, Pola Negri, Emil Janning, and others. In music, the batons of Wilhelm Furtwangler and Otto Klemperer conducted avant-garde music by composers like Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, and Ernst Krenek. Some of Berlin's biggest scandals were caused by opera. Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* provoked boos, whistles, and even fist fights. At Brecht and Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* one woman fainted, and other spectators howled and jeered. From the second performance, Nazis organised claques to try to disrupt the evening. Soon they were to disrupt the carefree Babylon – Berlin – utterly.

His love affairs continued to be complex and extraordinary. By the end of 1924 Marianne Zoff had left Brecht, having found him in bed with Helene Weigel, a beautiful Jewish actress with a successful career, who married Brecht in 1928. They had two children, Stefan, born on 3 November 1924, and Barbara, born on 18 October 1930. But this should not imply that Brecht was anything like faithful to Weigel. His other lovers in the 1920s included Asja Lacis, a Latvian-born, Russian-trained actress, who informed

him of some at least of the excitement of Meyerhold's revolutionary theatre; Marieluisse Fleisser, a significant playwright in her own right, and author of, for example, *Pioneers in Ingolstadt*; and, most significantly, Elisabeth Hauptmann, a would-be writer from a well-off Prussian family, whose fluency in English was to prove decisive to Brecht when she translated Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* for him.

Brecht's first Berlin-created work was *Man is Man* (though he had been toying with a play about a character called Galy Gay for years). Written in the closest collaboration with a group of sympathetic friends, including Elisabeth Hauptmann, Bernhard Reich (Asja Lacis's partner), Brecht's school friend Caspar Neher, who designed the first production at Darmstadt on 26 September 1926, and the journalist, Emil Burri, the play is a brilliant *tour de force*, that is still greatly underestimated, lyrical, cynical, theatrical, and funny. Feuchtwanger wrote: 'when the live Galy Gay holds the funeral oration for the dead Galy Gay, I know of no scene by a living author which can equal it in greatness of grotesque-tragic invention and basic grasp'.[12] It is, in fact, Brecht's first 'epic' drama, and some of its awkwardnesses, which do not detract from its dramatic power, come from the fact that Brecht was still formulating what he meant by this term. In May 1939, looking back on this work, he noted in his journal: 'I brought the epic elements "into the business" ready-made from the Karl Valentin theatre, the open-air circus, and the Augsburg Fair. Then there was film, especially the silents in the early days before the cinema began to copy drrrramatics [*sic*] from the theatre.'[13]

The Weimar Republic

German defeat at the end of the First World War led to chaos: the Kaiser abdicated and went into exile. The navy mutinied. Bolsheviks and anarchists, led by the Spartacists of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, tried to set up a Soviet-style government, but they were brutally crushed, and in the summer of 1919 Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles.

By this, Germany lost her overseas colonies, some territory to Poland and Alsace-Lorraine to France. She was disarmed, forced to pay reparations to the victorious allies, and to admit Allied occupation of the industrial Rhineland.

In August 1919, a new republican constitution was agreed at Weimar, and accepted by plebiscite. Weimar had been Goethe's home, and the new constitution attempted to embody his democratic

idealism. Its central provisions, though sometimes strengthening central government, were characterised by guarantees of democratic freedoms, including granting the vote to all men and women over the age of twenty. But its very liberal idealism appalled many reactionaries, and its freedoms allowed extremists of left and right to flourish. In the end, in 1933, they tore it down.

Equally significant was the new subject matter which so scoured life in the Weimar Republic, and which Brecht was now approaching: capitalism, the market, imperialism, and the relationship between economics and politics. Whether this signified a whole-hearted conversion to Marxism at this time is doubtful, but it does show an attempt to dramatise questions of power, and especially of the creation and workings of specific power structures. His experience of working as a member of a collective at the theatre of the Communist director, Erwin Piscator, at this time also sharpened his thinking, not only about political power, but also about the theatre itself, its function and standing as a social and intellectual institution, whose interests it served, what the role of the audience is or should be, and the place of dramatic literature within it.

Erwin Piscator

Born in 1893, Erwin Piscator was politicised by his experiences in the First World War. He flirted with Dadaism before taking over the Proletarian Theatre in 1920 in Berlin. In 1924 he became director of the Berlin Volksbühne, but his Communism, and his addiction to technology – sound recordings, projections, film, etc. – were too controversial, and he was dismissed. With backing from wealthy patrons, he established the Piscator-Buhne on Nollendorf-Platz in 1927. Here, with a collective of artists including Brecht, he strove for a new epic political theatre. The Piscator-Buhne's eventual bankruptcy was perhaps inevitable, but its director's achievements and influence were immense. After 1933 Piscator went into exile, first in the Soviet Union, then in the United States, where he taught at the New York Dramatic Workshop. He returned to West Germany after the Second World War, where he mounted a number of controversial plays. He died in 1966.

These are questions underlying the series of plays Brecht wrote in the late 1920s and early 1930s, known as *Lehrstucke*, which were deliberately created for an alternative 'theatre for instruction'. Their subject is dialectics itself. Spare in form, they use a minimum of naturalistic detail, and employ songs, direct address to the audience, and courtroom scenes where points of view can be argued. They aim to fuse content, form and function, or rather to let the contradictions between these stimulate reflection.

Alongside the *Lehrstücke*, Brecht worked with Kurt Weill to create a series of musical and operatic works, the first and most successful of which was *The Threepenny Opera*, based on Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which opened at the Theatre am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin on 31 August 1928. It was a shimmering success, especially because of its caustic and sentimental ballads which still retain their allure today. Brecht and Weill followed it with the less popular, but still attractive, *Happy End*, and, in March 1930, the major opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Meanwhile, the rights to film *The Threepenny Opera* had been bought, and Leo Lania, Bela Belasz, and Ladislas Vajda began to adapt the original.[14] But the project went sour, with disagreements, accusations of bad faith, and finally recourse to the courts. Brecht and Weill failed to prevent the film from going ahead, though each received some monetary compensation, and the events provoked Brecht into writing his only completed novel, *Threepenny Novel*, as well as the long theoretical essay 'The Threepenny Lawsuit'.[15]

In January 1933 the work of Brecht and many other progressive or controversial artists was stopped in its tracks. Hitler became German Chancellor. In the last years of the Weimar Republic, and especially after the Wall Street crash of 1929, the quality of life in Germany rapidly deteriorated. Unemployment soared, politics became polarised, and anti-Semitism strode the street in ugly fury. Would Hitler restore sense and stability? The answer came less than a month after he took power: the Reichstag, the nation's parliament, was burned down. Within days, swathes of the country's intellectual and artistic elite had either been arrested or had fled abroad. Brecht was one of the lucky ones. He escaped.

The Third Reich

Hitler's 'Reich' counted itself the third in German history. The first Reich was the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation', which lasted for 850 years, from the tenth century until 1806, when the Emperor Francis abdicated in the face of Napoleon's expansion in Europe. The second Reich was that of Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm

II, lasting from 1871 until the defeat in 1918. Hitler proclaimed that the third Reich would last for a thousand years. In the event, it collapsed in twelve.

Yet for a writer exile is particularly terrible, for the most basic tool of his trade, his language, is useless to him. And when his homeland is simultaneously being ravaged, as Germany was by Nazism, the loss becomes almost unendurable. Brecht and his family found a home in Denmark, on the island of Fyn, which became their base for nearly six years. It may be added that exile did not quash Brecht's sexual appetite. In Denmark he had at least two significant love affairs, first with Margarete Steffin, whom he had first met in Germany shortly before the Nazis took power and who now became a valued collaborator as well as his lover, and second with Ruth Berlau, a wealthy Danish Communist, who was both a political activist and a determined theatre worker.

The sudden severance from his home, his successful career, and its future possibilities clearly affected Brecht. He worked on a number of plays and other texts, though not with anything like the sharpness which might have been expected from his earlier works, and spent much time in travel. Sometimes this was in connection with productions of his works, sometimes for meetings or conferences of anti-Fascist writers or other progressive bodies, where he spoke, argued, and listened. Thus, in summer 1933 he was in Paris, and he returned there in the autumn. In 1934 he spent October and November in London. In the spring of 1935 he stayed with Tretyakov in Moscow; he was in Paris again in June, and in New York from October to December. He spent nearly four months of 1936 back in London, and in autumn 1937 and again in spring 1939 he was in Paris.

One of the reasons for his travels was to enable him to take part in the increasingly bitter arguments among progressive and left-wing intellectuals, writers, and artists about the nature of 'Realism', and in particular the Soviet-proclaimed 'Socialist Realism'. Brecht rejected this, and perhaps partly in a deliberate attempt to demonstrate that a much more subtle and challenging form of Marxist art was possible, he turned back to writing plays. The result was the series of dramas which made his name after the Second World War. In 1938 he completed *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* and the first version of *Galileo*. In 1939 he began work on *The Good Person of Szechuan* (which, however, was not completed until 1941) and wrote *Mother Courage and Her Children*, which received its world premiere in Zurich in April 1941. And in 1940 he completed *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti* and *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*.

Socialist Realism and Formalism; Naturalism and Realism

The 1917 Russian revolution brought new, apparently Marxist perceptions of reality, and therefore new subject matter and new priorities for the arts. At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, held in Moscow in August 1934, Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's Culture Minister, proclaimed the doctrine of Socialist Realism as the only acceptable form of writing for genuine Socialists. (See p. 22 above.)

Soviet-supporting critics like Georg Lukács and Alfred Kurella tried to develop Zhdanov's generalisations into a workable theory. They put the emphasis on content, and scorned especially the Modernist obsession with form ('Formalism') which, they said, either offered 'old' content in continually changing, 'new' forms, or else simply 'form' without content. For Lukács, since the subject matter of art – specifically literature – was new, the actions of individual characters in a work of fiction or drama were newly significant, because their motivation revealed the submerged causes. Realism required psychological and illusionist dimensions, because those were what enabled the reader or spectator to empathise with the character, accept his motives and thereby 'go along with' his actions.

But, for Brecht, new content required new forms, and indeed form and content were two halves of the dialectic which was the *sine qua non* of all art. This, he maintained, was true Realism, and it was concerned less with *reproducing* reality than with *mastering* it. In his journal he drew up a table which set his conception of Realism against what he called 'Naturalism' (though we may suspect he meant Socialist Realism). Thus, where Naturalism highlighted the 'reaction of individuals', Realism focused on 'social causality'; where Naturalism provided 'copies', Realism provided 'stylisations'; and whereas in Naturalism society was 'regarded as a piece of nature', in Realism society was 'regarded historically'. For Brecht, therefore, form as well as content was to be historicised. History was part of what had to be mastered, not simply something which flowed inevitably on, like a river towards the sea. And the V-effect was employed not simply to see the object 'afresh' (the original Formalist conception), but rather to expose its context (historical or other), and thereby act as an enabling agent for the reader or spectator.

In the meantime, world events were again pressing in on Brecht. The increasing likelihood of war in Europe forced him and his family to leave Denmark for Sweden in April 1939, and a year later they were forced further from Europe's epicentre to Finland. Finally, in May 1941, 'changing countries oftener than their shoes', they moved via the Soviet Union to the west coast of the United States. On the way, in Moscow, Margarete Steffin's desperate illness prevented her further travel. Brecht was distraught, and telephoned her from every station along the Trans-Siberian railway, the route of his escape. She died on 4 June. It has been suggested that Brecht should have stayed with her, but he had a passage on the last ship to the west coast of America (and it was going via Manila in the Philippines). Moreover, as Eric Bentley has pointed out, had Brecht spent even a week longer in Moscow, it is likely he would have disappeared into the gulag. Though he muffled his criticism of Stalin's regime in public, he was in no doubt about its reality in the privacy of his diary: 'Literature and art are up the creek, political theory has gone to the dogs, what is left is a thin, bloodless, proletarian humanism propagated by officialdom in an official article.' Later, he noted that 'in Fascism, Socialism is confronted with a distorted mirror-image of itself'.[16] The same month Brecht left the Soviet Union, June 1941, Germany invaded.

Brecht and his family lived in Santa Monica, California, for most of the six years they were in the United States. Times were not easy, though the physical danger they had endured in Europe from the Nazis was gone. The actor Fritz Kortner referred to Brecht living an 'almost Gandhi-like ascetic existence'[17] which, however, was punctuated by visits made and received:

> Helene Weigel held open house every Sunday evening. They were very nice occasions socially, unpretentious, warm, with beer and an item or two of Weigel's cooking. Hostess was a very good role for this actress, even if Host was not something her husband could bring himself to be. He would deposit himself in a corner where people had to come and seek him out, whereas she would flit about and make sure that any who felt unwelcome changed their minds.[18]

The move from Europe to America was another destructive upheaval for Brecht, and he recorded in his diary: 'for the first time in ten years, I am not working seriously on anything'.[19] He pondered whether to become an American citizen. In 1944 Ruth Berlau became pregnant. She discovered she also had a stomach tumour which was removed, but the baby, born by caesarean section, did not survive.

Brecht obtained a little work from Hollywood, most notably with Fritz

Lang on the script of *Hangmen Also Die*, but he had little else to show for living so close to so many studios. Otherwise, besides one or two adaptations of classics, he wrote most of *The Visions of Simone Machard* with the also exiled Lion Feuchtwanger, and the following year created *Schweyk in the Second World War*, an ironic sequel to Hašek's masterpiece. Finally, in 1944, with Ruth Berlau, he wrote the brilliant *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. In 1945, Charles Laughton, a significant film star, became entranced with *Galileo*, and he and Brecht began to work to create an English version which would be acceptable to American audiences.

> The collaboration with Laughton was the classic one of our profession – playwright and actor. At certain points he saw the play collapsing, at which he built himself up like an immoveable mountain of flesh until the required change was identified and made. This stubborn sensitivity proved to be more fruitful than his factual suggestions (which he always offered with the greatest circumspection).[20]

The production opened in Hollywood on 30 July 1947.

Brecht, however, was hardly able to enjoy this before he was summoned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities to Washington. He appeared before them on 30 October and, controlling his responses by recourse to his familiar cigars, he fenced courteously with the lawyers who tried to extract a commitment to Communism from him. 'Did you write that, Mr Brecht?' the prosecutor asked, having read (badly) a translation of a poem. 'No', replied Brecht, 'I wrote a German poem, but that is very different from this.' The transcript records like a stage direction: '[*Laughter*.]' The chairman, in dismissing Brecht, assured him that he was 'a good example' to other witnesses. But within little more than twenty-four hours, despite fog almost as thick as the obfuscating cigar fumes he had exhaled in the witness-box, Brecht, with typically heroic cowardice, was flying out of the United States, back towards Europe.

House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)

In 1938, the House of Representatives in Washington created an Un-American Activities Committee to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities.

In 1947, HUAC instituted Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, and after taking 'friendly' evidence from such luminaries as Ronald Reagan, summoned eleven

'unfriendly' witnesses, one of whom was Brecht. He was in fact the only one who answered the committee's questions: the remaining ten ('The Hollywood Ten') refused and all were gaoled.

A later purge of Hollywood decimated the industry by establishing a 'blacklist' for anyone suspected of 'Communist' connections: they were not to be allowed to work in films. HUAC famously posed the question: 'Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?' They also pressurised witnesses to name other 'Communists' for the blacklist (which ran to several hundred people). Most – like the famous director, Elia Kazan – submitted to the pressure. A very few, such as the playwright Arthur Miller, refused, and suffered for their integrity.

By the late 1950s, the American people were growing sick of HUAC's 'red-baiting'. In 1969, it was renamed the House Internal Security Committee, and in 1975 it was abolished.

He landed in Switzerland where *Mother Courage and Her Children* had successfully premiered. Teo Otto, stage designer of that *Mother Courage*, noted that 'the years that followed the war were a period of hope clad in rags', a comment which in a way summarises Brecht's own attitude at this time. In Switzerland, his adaptation of *Antigone*, as well as the premiere of *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti* were staged, and he worked on both *The Days of the Commune* and the theoretical statement, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*.

By the end of 1948 he was ready to re-enter the now divided Germany. He came via Czechoslovakia to the Soviet sector of Berlin. It was the time of the Cold War. East and west could not meet. Brecht, though he retained an Austrian passport, became effectively an East (Communist) German. The attraction, above all, was the offer of his own production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, with his wife, Helene Weigel, in the title role. This opened at the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin on 11 January 1949, and was a success comparable only with that of *The Threepenny Opera* over twenty years before. Brecht's theatrical future was then cemented with the establishment of the Berliner Ensemble, his own company, a mere month after the Communists proclaimed their sector of Germany the independent German Democratic Republic. And for the rest of its existence, East Germany supported Brecht's theatre to the hilt, through bad times and good. The subsidy was nearly three million marks per annum at the beginning, and it rose from there.

The repressive state and its theatrical jewel did not always co-exist easily. After the death of Stalin, the East Berlin workers revolted. Perhaps they were still infected with the Nazism of yesteryear, but their uprising was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks, and Brecht notoriously wrote a letter apparently supporting the repression. Was his reward the allocation to the Ensemble in March 1954 of the old Theatre am Schiffbauerdamm, where *The Threepenny Opera* had premiered in 1928, and where now his new, perhaps unsurpassed production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* received its first performance? Or the Stalin Peace Prize, which he was awarded in 1955? Perhaps it was permission to take his company abroad. In 1954, and again in 1955, they appeared in Paris, where in each year they won First Prize at the Théâtre des Nations. And in August 1956 they came to London.

Brecht was still an enigma. It was noticeable that his fierce rationality had become softer, and increasingly tempered by cunning. On the other hand, his position as a moralist was still contradicted by his personal immorality, at least in its sexual dimension. In these Berlin years he found time for new liaisons, most notably with Kathe Reichel and Isot Kilian. Nevertheless, he was no longer the bohemian outsider with a penchant for scandal of earlier years. Teo Otto recalled: 'For all his genius Brecht was endearingly simple; his talk was not aimed at the book of quotations, nor did he ever, in speech or gesture, flirt with posterity. He liked beer, sausages and straightforward conversation, was witty, humorous and a dead shot with words.'[21] Erwin Strittmatter, who only knew him after the war, said simply: 'Since Brecht died I have never again laughed tears.'[22]

In May 1956 Brecht was taken to hospital after a heart attack. That summer he was 'shrunken in body, swollen somewhat in the face, flaccid. And without that familiar and distinctive voice.'[23] In August he returned to rehearsals, and wrote a particularly apposite note of encouragement to the company before they left for London.[24] Any recovery, however, was an illusion. He died of a coronary thrombosis on 14 August 1956.

The key questions

German art and culture in the early decades of the twentieth century were dominated by Richard Wagner's idea of the *Gesamkunstwerk*, the total work of art which fused music, poetry, light, scenery, dance, and more into a single overwhelming whole. Beside this were more apparently progressive theatrical forms, like Naturalism and Expressionism, which also offered what was basically an intense experience. And over decades a theatre 'apparatus' had been created in Germany which was capable of 'theatring down' anything which challenged this intensity.[25]

For Brecht, however, a new age had dawned: the 'scientific age', which

required thinking theatregoers, not people who were swept away by an overwhelming tide of experienced feeling. For the scientific age was characterised by fluctuating money markets and wheat distribution, the development of petroleum complexes, and so on, which humanity had to master. Artistically, this provided subject matter not easily comprehended by a form developed to enhance a mythical mystique. 'Petroleum resists the five act form',[26] Brecht proclaimed. Moreover, as a Marxist, he was fond of repeating Marx's observation: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' Could the theatre help to 'change the world', in Marx's sense? How? How could theatre intervene in the daily affairs of humankind, unveil the commodifications inherent in bourgeois society, show how it is man-made and not eternal? Could theatre not simply interpret the world, but actually help people to change it?

This question, daunting enough in itself, was further complicated, however, by Brecht's insistence that theatre, even as it addressed this task, was to remain 'entertaining', though his concept of 'fun' was something other than Wagnerian self-forgetfulness. In 1939, in a lecture to Scandinavian students, he demanded:

> How can the theatre be both instructive and entertaining? How can it be divorced from spiritual dope traffic and turned from a home of illusions to a home of experiences? How can the unfree, ignorant man of our century, with his thirst for freedom and his hunger for knowledge; how can the tortured and heroic, abused and ingenious, changeable and world-changing man of this great and ghastly century obtain his own theatre which will help him to master the world and himself?[27]

If he could find the answer to this, he would truly create a theatre for 'the children of the scientific age'.

Brecht's answers

Brecht's answers to his key question changed over time, but there is a relentless persistence in his search for what he called 'epic theatre' for most of his working life.

Early in his career, he asserted that 'to expound the principles of the epic theatre in a few catch-phrases is not possible',[28] but even then it was clear to him that it would *report events*, and therefore be dispassionate. In addition, unlike comedy or tragedy, epic would deal with the totality of human relations. But Brecht was careful to place these relations in specific, changing, historical situations upon which they depended. Thus:

> The extraction and refinement of petroleum spirit represents a new complex of subjects, and when one studies these carefully one becomes struck by quite new forms of human relationship. A particular mode of behaviour can be observed both in the individual and in the mass, and it is clearly peculiar to the petroleum complex. But it wasn't the new mode of behaviour that created this particular way of refining petrol. The petroleum complex came first, and the new relationships are secondary.[29]

By studying people and their interrelations in particular situations, epic would enable opinions to be formed, and criticisms, or judgements, to be made. Thus epic theatre aimed to be influential; it would help to change the world.

This led to an epic form of drama which, in terms of construction, does not lead to an inexorable climax, or revelation, but rather proceeds step by step. If it were a horse race, our eyes would be on the course, not on the finish. It is a montage, in which each scene has a self-contained life, and, like the segments of a worm, each is capable of life even when cut off from its neighbour. It implies, not an ending, but a continuing, for human relations do not just 'end', and opinions and judgements are formed and revised. Thus *The Good Person of Szechuan* concludes with 'A Player' addressing the audience:

> What is your answer? Nothing's been arranged.
> Should men be better? Should the world be changed?[30]

To help the spectator to a position from which to consider this question, it was necessary for the play to concentrate on *how* things happen. Lion Feuchtwanger wrote in 1928 that Brecht wanted the spectator to 'observe the mechanism of an event like the mechanism of a car'.[31] Then he would be in a position to weigh the evidence and judge it. In 1931 Tretyakov reported Brecht's proposal for a 'panopticum theatre' which would present 'the most interesting trials in human history', such as the trial of Socrates, a witchcraft trial, and so on,[32] and it is no coincidence that so many of Brecht's plays include trials. Towards the end of his life, Brecht wanted to rename epic theatre 'dialectical' theatre because it presented a situation dialectically for discussion and judgement. It also presented it as something which *had happened*. Brecht wanted his theatre to 'historicize' the events portrayed: '*Historicizing* involves judging a particular social system from another social system's point of view':[33] 'Anyone who has observed with astonishment the eating habits, the judicial processes, the love life of savage peoples will also be able to observe our own eating customs, judicial

processes and love life with astonishment.'[34] Understanding one system through watching another, or the present through seeing the past, also of course suggests possible futures.

The heart of Brecht's method was the 'alienation' or V-effect. The word 'alienation' in English carries connotations of turning someone away from something, or inhibiting them. Brecht's German original, *Verfremdung*, probably derives from his stay in Moscow at the flat of Sergei Tretyakov, when he came into contact with a number of 'Formalists', most notably Viktor Shklovsky, who believed the purpose of art was to make us see the world afresh. At its most basic, this meant showing, say, the 'stoniness' of a stone. It was a process of seeing anew – what the Russians called *ostrannenie*, 'estranging' – but Brecht added to it something to do with the function of the stone. He asked, was it merely a nuisance, something to stub your toe on, or could it be used to throw at riot-controlling police, or to help build a barricade? This creates a process which involves something more than simply seeing afresh, and it therefore requires its own word, *Verfremdung*. Unfortunately, there is no agreement on an appropriate English equivalent: 'distanciation'? 'defamiliarisation'? It may be best to make do with 'V-effect'. Brecht made a number of attempts to define the V-effect. In *The Messingkauf Dialogues* he wrote: 'It consists in the reproduction of real-life incidents on the stage in such a way as to underline their causality and bring it to the spectator's attention.'[35] He saw Mei Lan-fang's Chinese players and thought their technique embodied the V-effect.[36] He even claimed it was a key to human progress: '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.'[37] The theatre's brightly lit stage is particularly successful in making us 'look again'. Brecht emphasised that not 'looking again', because we think we know something, usually means that we are taking it for granted. 'Habit is a great deadener', as Beckett reminds us in *Waiting for Godot*. It is to combat 'habit' that the V-effect is useful.

Oriental theatre

There are enormous and vastly varied traditions of performance in Asia. Two which influenced Brecht were the Japanese Noh plays, especially Arthur Waley's English versions of these, and the Chinese theatre of Mei Lan-fang.

Waley published *The No Plays of Japan* in 1921, highlighting their simplicity, stylisation, and the severity of their style. One play, *Taniko*, was translated from Waley's English into German by Elisabeth Hauptmann, and used almost word for word by Brecht as the play *He Who Says Yes*.

Mei Lan-fang (1894–1961) acted in 'the Pear Garden', the highly traditional and stylised Chinese dance theatre, all his life. He was in fact the foremost performer on this stage. He appeared in Moscow in April 1935 when Brecht was staying there with Tretyakov, who acted as Mei's host. At one performance in the Actors' Club, Brecht, Meyerhold, and Eisenstein were all present, and all wrote about the experience.

It operates when you think of your mother as someone's lover, or your teacher in his underwear. You look at your watch many times every day; yet when did you last 'see' it? Without looking, can you tell what form its numerals take, or if the number of jewels it contains is written on its face? The crude historical pictures hung out at the Bavarian fairs created a V-effect for the stories they illustrated. In the theatre, the effect is obtained when a woman plays a man to point up gender differences; or when or if we saw Romeo forcing money owed to him out of one of his tenants so that he could the better entertain Juliet. The whole barrage of typical 'Brechtian' theatre effects were originally devised to produce the V-effect: the use of placards, the half-curtain, exposing the source of lighting, the direct address to the audience; and so on. Particularly effective is when a character stops speaking and begins to sing, interrupting himself, as it were.

A theatre which 'historicised' and subjected its content to V-effects was not for those who simply wanted their drama 'dished up' for them. That was what Brecht called 'culinary' theatre, where the audience can safely 'hang its brains up in the cloakroom along with its coat'.[38] Initially his alternative vision was a 'smokers' theatre', perhaps like Karl Valentin's Blumensale Theatre, for 'smoking is an attitude highly conducive to observation'.[39] The ideal spectator was one capable of 'complex seeing', who could swim with the river, but also float above it. For his 1931 production of *Man Is Man*, he said he wanted a spectator who would resemble a reader, cross-checking, referring to the equivalent of footnotes, going back and re-reading. He was delighted at one audience discussion of *Mother Courage* in 1949 when a spectator

> singled out the drum scene . . . and praised the fact that it was precisely 'the most helpless person who was prepared to help, the same one as had been called a "poor creature" by her brother a few scenes earlier'. What a spectator! He must have made a note of this sentence in the third scene (with annoyance) – in the eleventh he found his answer.[40]

This spectator has in fact been drawn into the productive process of the theatre. His critical response, his aesthetic judgement has been brought into play decisively, so that the play has, in a sense, produced him, just as he has produced the play. This was precisely the two-way, dialectical process Brecht sought.

Implicit in such a response, of course, is enjoyment. Throughout his career Brecht insisted that 'fun' is necessary in the theatre. In 1926 Elisabeth Hauptmann noted that 'if Brecht gets no fun out of what he has created, he immediately goes and changes it'.[41] And this remained his approach. Twenty years later, he stated: 'theatre needs no other passport than fun, but this it has got to have'.[42] Of course, for Brecht, learning was fun, dialectics was fun, and he protested 'against the suspicion that [they are] highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair[s].' He asserted, significantly, that 'the contrast between learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule'.[43]

Theatre practice

For Brecht, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. He often seemed content to accept any theatrical practice which seemed to answer an immediate need of the 'theatre of the scientific age'.

For example, he was not very interested in actor training, and might employ any actor who was intellectually and artistically interested in the problems posed by his epic theatre. Nevertheless, he did suggest a number of acting exercises or improvisations for the epic actor, such as adopting different but typical attitudes of smokers, or developing scenes out of simple situations, like, for example, women (or men) folding linen.

Observation, Brecht maintained, was the actor's key. He should observe like the scientist who watched the swinging lantern.

> Above all other arts
> You, the actor, must conquer
> The art of observation.
> Your training must begin among
> The lives of other people. Make your first school
> The place you work in, your home,

> The district to which you belong,
> The shop, the street, the train.
> Observe each one you set eyes upon.
> Observe strangers as if they were familiar
> And those whom you know as if they were strangers.[44]

But merely observing was not enough

> because the original says what it has to say with too subdued a voice. To achieve a character rather than a caricature, the actor looks at people as though they were playing him their actions, in other words as though they were advising him to give their actions careful consideration.[45]

Consequently, a Brechtian actor will perform many exercises in observation, watching and imitating others, describing for others to imitate, and so on. But the point will be in *presenting* the observed behaviour.

This is implicit in Brecht's most significant acting exercise, the 'Street Scene'. You witness an old man who is crossing the road knocked down by a lorry. Explain what you saw by demonstrating it. First, you show the old man trudging painfully along, puffing, leaning on his stick. You point out that he does not look to see if there is any traffic, but simply steps off the kerb. Then you show the lorry driver, and how he took his eyes off the road to light a cigarette at the critical moment. You demonstrate so that each participant's share of the responsibility will be clear.

You need not be a highly trained actor in order to do this. You can explain that, say, the old man leaned on a stick: you need not actually have a stick. Brecht points out that it may increase the clarity of the demonstration if the acting is not perfect, because it is important that the bystanders – police, other witnesses, etc. – should concentrate on *what happened*, and not be distracted into admiration of the witness's acting skills. Besides, there is no attempt here to create an illusion. This is a report. In no sense are you to 'experience' the action. Your characterisations depend on the events and relevant observable features – did he limp? was his hair too long so it prevented him seeing the approach of the lorry? And so on. You might indulge in a little make-up by, say, ruffling your hair, but only if it is relevant to explaining the event. Do you speak passionately? Not unless there is a particular point to be made by it, and even then you may preface your apparent increase in emotion by acknowledging that 'he got really cross'. Do you 'lose yourself' in the performance? Of course not. Finally, Brecht is eager to point out that this 'theatre of the street' is *useful*. Its purpose is to enable judgement to be made as to the responsibility for the accident. Many things might depend on it, such as the lorry driver's job, or

insurance payments, or the building of a pedestrian crossing at this corner. This acting does not spring from the actor's 'soul'; it quotes other people.

One of Brecht's finest plays, *The Measures Taken*, has often been misinterpreted as an apology for Stalinism, or an attack on individualism. In fact, it is not an apology or an attack on anything. It is a *report* of an incident, like the street scene, which then invites us to analyse and judge it. And we must judge the judgement too. The play does not endorse a particular course of action; it opens up something which has happened to questioning. It is helpful if the spectator knows the outcome of the event in advance. Then it is easier to focus on *how* it happened, and what can be done about it. Brecht's adaptation of *Hamlet* for German radio began with Horatio explaining that the listener was *going to* hear of

> carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
> And, in the upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

Then the play proceeded. In this way, Brecht's theatre provides a contrast to the *intensity* of other systems, and especially of German Expressionism, Stanislavskian naturalism, and Wagnerian feeling.

When it came to production, Brecht often seemed unable to rehearse a play unless there were plenty of people present, any of whom might make suggestions or ask questions. Carl Weber, an assistant director at the Berliner Ensemble, described how, when he appeared at his first rehearsal, he believed the coffee break was in progress so he sat waiting, until someone said: 'Well, now we're finished, let's go home.' Brecht sat in the middle of the stalls, towards the front, and responded volubly to whatever was proceeding, guffawing with laughter, looking puzzled, shouting a suggestion, and occasionally – about twice per production, he calculated – losing his temper. Rehearsals were the means to explore the play. He sought solutions to problems which the play set, collaboratively and in a spirit of enquiry and intellectual adventure. It reminded some visitors of a children's nursery.

Brecht's attitude to his company was unequivocal. According to Weber, 'he truly loved actors, and they returned this love in kind'.[46] They appreciated his desire, granted at the Berliner Ensemble, for very long rehearsal periods – up to, or even longer than, a year – before he felt ready to put his productions before the public. However, his rehearsal process became increasingly formalised after his death, and if the following description seems over-schematic, it is because it draws some aspects from the later Berliner Ensemble model, to focus Brecht's practice.

At the first rehearsal it was usual for Brecht to introduce the work briefly, and make some generalised statements about the play, the story line, its central oppositions and perhaps about how rehearsals were to proceed. The work began with the first 'naive' reading. In this, parts were read round the group. When the speaker changed, the next reader took over, but there was no attempt to match actors to parts. Actors read lightly, with interest, but with no attempt at characterisation or 'drama'. Stage directions, scene headings, and so on, were also read out. The scene (or whole play) was then discussed, often in the manner of the discussion reproduced in *Brecht on Theatre*.[47] If possible it proceeded dialectically, by question and answer: 'What happens in the first scene? Brecht asks. A street is being built, leading to the town. At whose behest? At the behest of the Socialist Unity Party. Brecht says no. Silence . . . Brecht then adds, "That is revealed only in the third scene".'[48] 'What happens?' was the key question. Discussion focused on the story. 'The exposition of the story and its communication by suitable means of alienation constitute the main business of the theatre.'[49] Where? When? Who? What? All specific, concrete questions. Where does it happen? When does it happen? Who is involved? What happens?

Then the answers were evaluated. What is interesting about this play? Why are we proposing to present it? Discussion covered historical, political, social, and moral questions, and finally aesthetics. Whatever was agreed upon here would inform all the work on the play, and had to be accessible ultimately to the audience. These discussions led naturally to the first decisions about settings, costumes, music, and so on.

Brecht, who worked well with designers, especially his friend from school days Caspar Neher, preferred to begin rehearsing without preconceived designs, and encouraged his designer to make initial sketches during the naive readings. These would implicitly include suggestions about characters' postures and possible groupings. Designs begin 'with the people themselves' and 'what is happening to and through them', Brecht insisted. The designer 'provides no "decor", frames and backgrounds, but constructs the space for "people" to experience something in'.[50] Weber pointed out that Brecht wanted above all *a space* to tell his story in, and Thomson uses the German word *Bild*, which means not only picture and frame, but also includes the connotation of understanding, as in the English phrase, to 'get the picture'.[51] With this in mind Brecht's setting for, say, *Mother Courage and Her Children* was deceptively simple: the white, silky curtain at 'half height' across the stage, its draw wires constantly visible to remind us we are watching a play; the revolve built into the stage floor; the hanging military paraphernalia. No more than these. But Jones points out that the horizontal division of the space by the curtain wires, when the action beneath seems circular, is not accidental: 'Brecht, who believed that the round and round

theory was an exploitative myth, presented his fiction within a frame that was horizontally bisected, as if stage reality were dialectical and capable of objectifying and particularizing human actions.'[52] The onstage buildings in this production had a chunky reality, but were incomplete, suggestive rather than real. In the earlier production of *Mother*:

> the stage was not supposed to represent any real locality: it as it were took up an attitude towards the incidents shown; it quoted, narrated, prepared and recalled. Its sparse indication of furniture, doors, etc, was limited to objects that had a part in the play, i.e. those without which the action would have been altered or halted.[53]

Mother

Mother is a realist novel in the Tolstoyan tradition by Maxim Gorky, published in 1906. Though based on fact, it tells the almost archetypal story, at least from a Socialist perspective, of the growth of a proletarian mother's revolutionary consciousness. It was adapted several times for the stage, especially after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and on 10 January 1926 one of the survivors of the original events, a Comrade Smirnov, was interviewed by *Pravda*.

The most famous adaptation was by Nathan Zarkhy for the film *Mother*, directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin, in 1926. But, as Zarkhy admitted, 'the course of the story and of the characters is developed independently [from Gorky's novel] – from the cause of the mother's change of heart and her unintentional treachery to her death in the demonstration'.

Brecht's adaptation was similarly free, and also rejected the 'realist' mould of the original. But he did remember from the film the sequence of the coming of spring, when the frost begins to drip off the twigs and the house roofs, and the ice on the river starts to crack. He was to use Pudovkin's imagery to unforgettable effect in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

This production also used projections – pictures and texts – which referred to the great events like war and strikes going on beyond the particular story being told, but affecting its events. The settings, projections, and so on were designed not 'to help the spectator, but to block him; they prevent his complete empathy, interrupt his being automatically carried away'.[54]

During this preparatory period of rehearsal, initial casting was carried out. But it was always plain that at this stage casting was provisional. It is also worth remembering that in the finest of the *Lehrstucke*, actors actually change roles during performance. In *The Messingkauf Dialogues* Brecht warns:

> Parts are allotted wrongly and thoughtlessly. As if all cooks were fat, all peasants phlegmatic, all statesmen stately. As if all who love and are loved were beautiful. As if all good speakers had a fine voice . . . 'He has a kingly figure.' What does that mean? Do all kings have to look like *Edward VII*? 'But he lacks a commanding presence.' Are there so few ways of commanding?[55]

Once cast, further naive readings helped the actor to approach his character.

> When reading his part the actor's attitude should be one of a man who is astounded and contradicts . . . Before memorizing the words, he must memorize what he felt astounded at and where he felt impelled to contradict. For these are the dynamic forces that he must preserve in creating his performance.[56]

Then the character's 'super-task' had to be worked out. The 'super-task' referred to the character's place in the overall purpose of the play and how it contributed to its political, historical, moral, social, and aesthetic concerns. Discovering the super-task involved three steps. First, the actor had to look at his character objectively, concentrating especially on his function in the story, his concrete actions, and his status. He was actively to seek the contradictions in the part, and note objectively the choices the character made. Second, he had to see the character 'from inside', through his actions rather than his emotions: 'In phase two the actor empathises with the character and the "magic if" places the actor in the circumstances of the character. The introduction of the 'method of physical actions' is consistent with Brecht at this point since it focuses the actor on behaviour rather than feelings.'[57] Third, the actor had to 'objectify' the character and adopt a 'critical attitude' so that he could show that he was showing. This involved clarifying but not resolving the contradictions, and presenting not a 'through-line' but the sweep and rhythm of a zigzag path, inconsistent and certainly not 'inevitable'. Finally, the actor should enjoy creating this contradictory, even fragmented being, should obtain 'fun' from it and from the result, and should present it to his audience with grace and humour.

Imperceptibly we have reached the second, main phase of Brecht's

rehearsal process. This begins with 'blocking', that is, arranging the actor's movements and the stage groupings. Brecht never came to rehearsals with preconceived plans of where or how movements should occur; virtually everything was improvised. Sometimes he would have a strong idea, which he would demonstrate (extremely convincingly, by the way), but he was always open to alternative suggestions. Actors were actively and urgently encouraged to make their own suggestions or, rather, they were encouraged to show and try out variations.

The blocking was to be so clear that a spectator, unable to hear the actors' voices, viewing the production through thick glass, would still be able to follow the twists and turns of the story.

> Positions should be retained as long as there is no compelling reason for changing them – and a desire for variety is not a compelling reason. If one gives in to a desire for variety, the consequence is a devaluation of all movement on the stage; the spectator ceases to look for a specific meaning behind each movement, he stops taking movement seriously. But, especially at the crucial points in the action, the full impact of a change of position must not be weakened. Legitimate variety is obtained by ascertaining the crucial points and planning the arrangement around them.[58]

According to Eric Bentley, blocking was so important that Brecht 'would go through every scene like a movie director noting every "frame" in a sequence'.[59] He insisted that every movement, even a hesitation, should be performed with conviction. 'If the actor turns to the audience it must be a whole-hearted turn', he said[60] and Bentley called his blocking 'stylised, almost mannered, definitely pictorial and formal'. He noted:

> [Brecht's] pet hate was actors in a straight line or symmetrically disposed across the stage. His preference was, for example, a solitary figure in one corner, and a clump of figures at a distance (a clump, not a row). As to movement . . . Brecht would have two things to say about actors' 'walks': first, don't walk a pace or two, make it a walk clear across the stage; second, don't walk while talking, walk in a silence, make a dramatic pause out of your walk, let the only sound be the sound of your feet.[61]

As for groupings, in 1933 Brecht asserted: 'The epic theatre uses the simplest possible groupings, such as express the event's overall sense. No more "casual", "lifelike", "unforced" grouping; the stage no longer reflects

the "natural" disorder of things. The opposite of natural disorder is aimed at: natural order.'[62] He artfully used the work of painters to ensure 'natural order', such as Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding* which served as the model for the wedding scene in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

For blocking purposes, the text was split into 'processes'. Each process was a complete entity, an element of the scene, a particular interaction between characters. Each process might be given its own explanatory title, telling what happens in it, so that it became, virtually, a tiny playlet of its own. If the story consisted of 'one thing after another', as Brecht insisted, each process was a single 'thing', and, significantly, complete in itself. It should not appear as part of some seamless chain. When the relationship changes, or a decision is taken, the scene reaches a 'nodal point', where one process ends and the next begins. A nodal point is an interruption, a change of direction, a moment of decision. In the third, fourth, or fifth naive readings, actors were encouraged to say 'Stop!' at the nodal points, and pause, before continuing. The blocking needed to notice the nodal points, because they were often where movement occurred, and might be suitable points for silence.

In *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, in the scene entitled 'Charity Begins at Home', the First SA Man's line, 'What does he say, then?' creates a nodal point: at this moment he can let the Old Woman's remarks pass, or he can pursue them. He chooses to pursue them.[63] In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a nodal point occurs in the penultimate scene when the Peasant's Wife says to Kattrin: 'Pray, poor creature, pray.' At this, Kattrin stops being a spectator and becomes involved.[64] In *Man Is Man*, a nodal point occurs when Wang asks Widow Begbick for beer 'for a white man'. Not only does Begbick change her mind here and decide to serve him, but Polly and his comrades realise where Jip is, and that they will have to do something themselves, rather than just wait for Jip's return.[65]

The junction of process and nodal point may also be thought of in terms of *gest*, an original but elusive term which Brecht used with annoying inconsistency. As early as 1920, when writing *Drums in the Night*, he desperately sought a 'gesture' that would carry complex meanings, and be 'visible from the gallery, strong enough to smell and be carried away by'.[66] John Willett, Brecht's English editor, defined *gest* as an amalgam of 'gist and gesture; an attitude, or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions'.[67] Brecht himself wrote:

> The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters is what we call the realm of gest. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social gest: the characters are cursing, flattering,

> instructing one another, and so on. The attitudes which people adopt towards one another include even those attitudes which would appear to be quite private, such as the utterances of physical pain in an illness, or of religious faith. These expressions of a gest are usually highly complicated, so they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasises the entire complex.[68]

A gest is self-contained, and may involve any or all of a process, a social relationship, and a significant gesture or movement.

A song has almost all the characteristics of a gest, and it is significant that it was in connection with *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* that Brecht first employed the term. He referred to moments such as the tenderest, most romantic melody in *The Threepenny Opera*, when Macheath and Polly sing of how her wedding dress has been nicked, the ring stolen and 'love will or will not endure/Regardless of where we are'.[69] The song is a self-contained process which makes its own concrete contribution, functioning, according to Brecht, as 'a muck-raker, an informer, a nark'.[70] This is only successful, however, when the music is given, as it were, its own space.

> Mark off clearly the songs from the rest.
> Make it clear that this is where
> The sister art enters the play.
> Announce it by some emblem summoning music,
> By a shift of lighting
> By a caption
> By a picture.
> The actors having made themselves singers
> Will address the audience in a different tone.
> They are still characters in the drama
> But now also openly
> They are the playwright's own accomplices.[71]

Brecht called this separation of the musical items in the production of *The Threepenny Opera* a 'striking innovation', underlined by the presence *on stage* of the small orchestra. The land of Richard Wagner was amazed! Later, when Brecht sought to employ music and song less crudely, each song still retained the characteristics of a gest, no matter how well integrated into the texture of the play, because it inevitably *interrupted* the spoken dialogue and was self-contained.

Brecht's composers

Brecht worked with a number of prominent composers, among them Kurt Weill (1900–50), who composed *The Threepenny Opera*, *Happy End*, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, *He Who Says Yes*, and more. Weill wrote two short Expressionist operas before he worked with Brecht in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The two collaborators were perhaps less suited to one another than their joint works might suggest. In 1933 Weill, like Brecht, was forced into exile. In 1934 he composed *The Eternal Road*, a pageant of Jewish history with a book by Franz Werfel, and the following year he emigrated to the United States with his wife, Lotte Lenya (Jenny in the original *Threepenny Opera*). In America he composed musicals with writers such as Maxwell Anderson and Ogden Nash, including *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *One Touch of Venus*, and *Down in the Valley*. He became a US citizen in 1943.

Hanns Eisler (1898–1962) was temperamentally closer to Brecht than was Weill. A student of Arnold Schoenberg, but a committed Communist (though not a Stalinist), he sought a social and political role for music, and a 'communicative' style, which is best heard in his scores for *Mother* and *The Measures Taken*. He also wrote the music for the film *Kuhle Wampe*, and set some of Brecht's and other political ballads to music. He lived in the United States between 1933 and 1948, when he returned to East Germany.

Paul Dessau (1894–1979) was a Socialist conductor who emigrated to the United States in 1933, returning after the Second World War to East Germany. He composed scores for Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechuan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*, which he also made into an opera. Dessau continued to compose into his old age, including the opera *Einstein*, premiered in 1971.

Brecht also worked with, among others, Paul Hindemith (1895–1963), who composed *Lindberg's Flight* and *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*; and Rudolf Wagner-Regeny (1903–69), who composed *Trumpets and Drums* for the Berliner Ensemble.

Walter Benjamin defined epic theatre as 'gestural', by which he seems to have meant something close to, if not the same as, Brecht's *gest*. The gest is

something which epitomises, or typifies, the whole, he argues. It works like a quotation. Consequently, Benjamin continues, it is difficult to 'falsify', and, because it is self-contained, it is also easily interrupted. Thus, if a scholar scratches his head, as a gest this might suggest a dithering, somewhat other-worldly character. If the gest is interrupted, the import of scratching the head suddenly becomes noticeable – it is what people who do not really know what they are talking about do; they have to think; they are not so certain as might appear. Gest and interruption thus become to a degree equivalent to process and nodal point. And note, in this example, they 'inform' on the scholar's pretensions.

Walter Benjamin

Born in 1892, Walter Benjamin was not much esteemed in his lifetime, but has since become recognised as a highly original Marxist critic. Best known for *The Author as Producer* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin was an independent scholar trying to live by his writing.

Among his most influential ideas is that of the art work's 'aura' – what gives it its special status. He believed that film could demolish this 'aura' in a revolutionary way because a film is composed shot by shot. He asserted of film almost precisely what Brecht asserted of theatre: that the consecutive construction of self-contained shots (*gests*) obstructs the spectator's empathy and encourages his thinking, and perhaps even action. Benjamin did not discount the power of reactionary (e.g. Nazi) films, but pointed to the fundamental lie implicit in the pretence that they were non-political. This, he affirmed, was a problem of the means of production.

In 1933 Benjamin went into exile in France, where he became increasingly lonely and desperate, and in 1940, fearful the advancing Nazis would catch him, he committed suicide.

It is possible to argue that Brecht's plays are composed of sequences of gests. In discussing Peter Lorre's performance in *Man Is Man*, Brecht notes that his 'efforts to make particular incidents seem striking . . . cause him to be represented as a short-term episodist'.[72] In *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, it was the interruptions to the gests which prevented it from becoming naturalistic, as some of Brecht's critics imagined it to be. He confided to his journal:

> *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* has now gone to press. Lukacs has already welcomed *The Spy* [one scene in the play] as if I were a sinner returned to the bosom of the Salvation Army. Here at last is something taken straight from life! He overlooks the montage of 27 scenes, and the fact that it is only actually a table of gests, the gest of keeping your mouth shut, the gest of looking about you, the gest of sudden fear, etc. The pattern of gests in a dictatorship.

And he warns: 'The actor will be well advised to study the street scene before playing one of the short scenes.'[73]

Brecht emphasised the *social* dimension of the gest. He pointed out that a man cringing from a fierce dog may be gestic, but this has no social content until it becomes clear that he is a tramp who is constantly harassed by watchdogs. The gest of uniformed and strutting Fascists only becomes social when they stride over corpses. Weigel's gest for the Governor's Wife in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, by which she made her servant 'make a back', which she then sat on, was of exactly this order.

These are details which are fundamental in Brechtian theatre. Indeed, his directing centred on building up details incrementally, one at a time, until the whole picture was finished. From the beginning of his career this was true of Brecht's work. When directing *Edward II* in 1924

> The demands which Brecht made on his actors were unusual and strange for them. German actors attach little importance to formal actions such as eating, drinking or fencing. They summarise them, simply indicate them casually. Brecht, however, demanded not only that they should be performed realistically and exactly, but also that they should be skilful. He explained to the actors that such actions on the stage should give the audience pleasure.[74]

In later productions he spent hours on details: how Grusha should pick up the baby, or the Recruiting Officer approach Eiliff. 'The devil is in the detail' he was fond of saying, and transcripts of his rehearsals show his painstaking attention to the 'devil'.[75]

Each detail informs a single process between nodal points. Each nodal point is marked by a change, or a possible change, in the scene's direction. Brecht's rehearsal exercise, known as 'Not . . . But . . .' was designed to elucidate this. At each nodal point the action stops and the actors play out, first, what did *not* happen, and then what *did* happen (that is, the written scene), prefacing each alternative with the spoken word – 'Not –' or 'But –'. This naturally creates a strong V-effect.

> The very simplest sentences that apply in the (V-effect) are those with 'Not . . . But': (He didn't say 'come in' but 'keep moving'. He was not pleased but amazed.) They include an expectation which is justified by experience but, in the event, disappointed. One might have thought that . . . but one oughtn't to have thought it. There was not just one possibility but two; both are introduced, then the second one is alienated, then the first as well.[76]

Thus, Shen Te did *not* send the gods away, *but* offered them a bed for the night. Brecht notes about Grusha in his journal: 'She should be stubborn and not rebellious, submissive and not good, long-suffering and not incorruptible, etc, etc'.[77]

Besides the 'Not . . . But . . .' exercise, Brecht sometimes made his actors work in the third person:

> I put in 10 minutes epic rehearsal for the first time in the eleventh scene. Gerda Muller and Dunskus as peasants are deciding that they cannot do anything against the Catholics. I ask them to add 'said the man', 'said the woman' after each speech. Suddenly the scene became clear and Muller found a realistic attitude.[78]

He also transposed scenes into simple stories, and asked the actors to act them, keeping the existing blocking, but reading the story (told in the third person, of course) instead of using the play's lines. Other rehearsal techniques included rehearsing in the past tense, and saying the stage directions as they were carried into effect. Actors swapping roles was also a valuable means of giving the actor a new view of his own character. Where an actor had trouble with a speech or even a song, he was asked to paraphrase it, or to transpose it into his native dialect. For actors who had to sing – and Brecht preferred them not to be trained singers – he asked for 'a kind of speaking-against-the-music', so that 'if he drops into the melody it must be an event'. He adds characteristically: 'the actor can emphasize it by plainly showing the pleasure which the melody gives him'.[79]

It is impossible to block the play without having the settings present, and at every stage at least rudimentary scenery was used. Costumes, too, were worn when available, though Brecht preferred his designer not to think about these until he had seen the actual actors. And props, too, added their own sort of authenticity:

> *Weigel's props*
>
> As the man who grows millet will choose
> The heaviest grain to plant in his

Experimental plot, and as the poet
Searches for words that are fit,
So too does she select with equal care
The properties her characters possess:
The pewter spoon
That hangs from the collar of
Courage's Mongolian jacket,
The bound party card of friendly Vlassova,
The other, Spanish mother's net
For fish or the metal bowl in which
Antigone gathers dust . . .
Everything is chosen
According to age
Uses
And beauty
By knowing eyes and her
Net-making bread-baking
Soup-cooking hands
At home with reality.[80]

At a certain point in rehearsals – 'when all the details had been brought to a certain point, not of completion, but of diminished possibilities'[81] – the play's overall shape was explored in a series of runs-through. The ultimate aim was to ensure that the story emerged with clarity. 'Everything hangs on the story', Brecht insisted; 'it is the heart of the theatrical performance'. Alienation in the acting and the gestic construction of the separate incidents was not forgotten, however: 'The parts of the story have to be carefully set off against one another by giving each its own structure as a play within the play.'[82] Thus was revealed the story's chain of causes and effects.

A single run-through could reveal much, especially some of the contradictions Brecht prized so highly, as he noted in his journal in December 1948: 'At the first run-through of scenes 1 to 8 [of *Mother Courage*], Ihering notices variations in Weigel's portrayal of Courage that we had not observed when we were looking at the individual scenes. The variations are therefore of the right sort, they can only be seen in long sequences.'[83] Runs-through also importantly enabled director and actors to find and fix a 'tempo' for the performance, and Brecht recommended special rehearsals for this (in costume, since costume tends to slow actors down). And, just before the first performance, Brecht insisted on a 'marking' rehearsal, that is, a complete run-through carried out extremely rapidly, perhaps at double speed, with lines spoken quietly but completely and distinctly, and moves

carried through with absolute accuracy. The marking rehearsal was not only invaluable in ensuring that every actor knew precisely what he was doing, when and how, it also greatly enhanced the quality of the actors' relaxation, as well as, paradoxically, releasing new energy.

At last came the performance. Then 'whatever the actor offers in the way of gesture, verse structure, etc, 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.'[84] The concept of ease is extremely hard to define, but it is helped into existence by the marking rehearsal, and it embraces the relationship with the audience. Carl Weber wrote of *Mother* at the Berliner Ensemble:

> The set was 'quoting' an environment rather than representing it; there was extensive use of projections and scene titles; the small chorus, in its songs to the audience, commented on the fable and/or the actions shown on stage; there was an enchanting ease and, yes, elegance with which even the most serious scenes were performed.[85]

Brecht himself compared it to the ease with which flood water tears away the banks of a river, or an earthquake shakes the ground. And the final results might be photographed and preserved in a 'modelbook'.

Modelbooks

Brecht published 'modelbooks' after his productions of *Antigone* and *Mother Courage*; he also published *Aufbau einer Rolle – Galilei*, which is comparable to the modelbooks, as well as *Theaterarbeit* – detailed records of the Berliner Ensemble's first six productions.

Modelbooks consist of the playtext; several hundred photographs of the production; and copious explanatory notes and commentary on the production. Their purpose initially was to record in detail a particular production, though the *Courage Modelbook* actually recorded three productions by Brecht: the 1949 production with Helene Weigel as Courage; the 1950 production with Thérèse Giehse as Courage; and the 1951 Berliner Ensemble production, again with Weigel as Courage.

Brecht published these modelbooks when German life, culture, and theatre were in almost total ruin after the Second World War: they were in the first place an attempt to begin to rebuild. But they

were also to demonstrate in great detail a new kind of performance, to offer practical solutions to problems of production, and incidentally to demonstrate in practice the validity of his anti-Socialist Realist theoretical position. The modelbooks focus on theatre practice, not writing plays. But Brecht warned against slavish copying: 'A model is not a blueprint.'

Even after the first night, however, Brecht continued to give notes and alter the production. Thus, when it was clear that audiences for *Mother Courage* were responding to the central character as a put-upon 'little person', the opening song was transposed out of Scene 1 and made into a kind of Prologue, rather like 'Mack the Knife' in *The Threepenny Opera*. This made Courage seem more predatory, and more in control of her own destiny, as she actively hunted out the war. Often, however, the changes served to invest the play with more humour. 'A theatre that can't be laughed in is a theatre to be laughed at', he insisted. His last note to his company before his death, written as they were embarking on their first tour to London, as a result of which both Brecht's plays and his company were to be hailed internationally as the most significant of their time, contained exemplary instructions:

> Our playing needs to be quick, light, strong. This is not a question of hurry, 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 one's 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.[86]

These concerns informed Brecht's own productions throughout his career. Before the Nazis seized power, his most significant production was probably *Man Is Man* at the Berlin Staatstheater in 1931, with Peter Lorre as Galy Gay and Helene Weigel as Widow Begbick. Brecht's production aimed for the detachment of a sporting contest, with its transformations – Jip's from soldier into god, Fairchild's from terror of the regiment to civilian, Begbick's canteen into empty space, and Galy Gay's into a 'human fighting machine' – seen as music hall turns, and Galy Gay's development from packer to person, to 'blank page', to remorseless fighter, viewed as no more

Figure 4.2 *Man Is Man*, Berlin Staatstheater, 1931.

than a shuffling of masks. The production, in other words, was constructed as a montage, and Brecht built on this by using wildly different acting styles, a jagged rhythm which broke up the flow of the action, actors on stilts, projections above the stage, and so on.

Thus, Fairchild's transformation was marked off as a separate incident. The half-curtain was drawn, the 'Stage Manager' appeared and announced: 'Presenting an insertion: Pride and demolition of a great personality'. The sequence was then performed, but with further interruptions from the 'Stage Manager'.[87] The soldiers themselves were presented as huge grotesques, according to Sergei Tretyakov: 'Across the stage strode giant soldiers, holding on to a rope so as not to fall from the stilts concealed in their trousers. They were hung about with rifles and wore tunics smeared with lime, blood and excrement.'[88] They were proto-Fascists, apparently, yet also vital, exploited, comradely, and clown-like. And they often set – or broke – the rhythm of the performance: at the sale of the elephant, Uriah acted as a kind of master of ceremonies, announcing each 'turn' as if he were presenting the rounds of a boxing match. These interruptions not only broke up the flow of the drama, they also, paradoxically, served to ratchet up the tension. The interruption therefore had a dual function: it enter-

tained and also, simultaneously, it made the adrenalin flow – as at a real boxing match.

Brecht's production employed the half-curtain, before which the first scene, and other interludes, were performed. Most of the scenery was extremely sketchy, and easily moved and removed. At the back were screens upon which captions were projected. Thus, for Scene 2, when the soldiers were to lose Jip, the screen read: '4 – 1 = 3'. When the soldiers enlisted Galy Gay to take Jip's place, '3 + 1 = 4' was projected. And for Scene 8, when it is demonstrated that 'man equals man', '1 = 1' was projected on the screen.

The acting was criticised for its lack of clarity and consistency. Partly this was because Brecht was attempting something new, that is, the use the gest as the basis for the presentation. Thus, the dismantling of the canteen involved a typically cool and illuminating piece of gestic acting by Helene Weigel:

> One of the more striking aspects of the dismantling of the canteen was the lowering, washing and folding of the sheets suspended as a roof above the stage. Begbick unhooked them with a long pole while delivering her first lines . . . She washed them while singing the song about the loss of her good name by lowering them into a trap in the stage. She moved them as though they were in water and then pulled up clean sheets substituted for the dirty ones beneath the stage. On the reprise of her song she folded the clean sheets with the soldier Uriah.[89]

Peter Lorre's Galy Gay structured his performance through a sequence of gests, such as his showing of fear by simply turning away from the audience, dipping his hands in whitewash, smearing it across his face, and then turning back (a trick learned from Karl Valentin). Lorre aimed to show man as inconsistent and contradictory: he tried to expose different kinds of behaviour, to illustrate 'this way' of doing various things, as opposed to other ways. The separate incidents were supposed to cohere in the spectator's imagination, as with film montage. And they led to his final memorable appearance: 'a figure with a knife between his teeth, hung with hand grenades, in a tunic stinking of the trenches – the shy and proper petty bourgeois of yesterday, now a machine for murder'.[90]

The Caucasian Chalk Circle was Brecht's last completed play before he left his American exile to return to Europe, and the last completed production of his life. The production was designed by Karl von Appen, who had been incarcerated by the Nazis for four years as a Communist. Brecht asked him for something like a traditional nativity scene, with Grusha and the peasants like Mary and Joseph, and the Fat Prince and the Governor's

Figure 4.3 *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Berliner Ensemble, 1954. Helene Weigel as the Governor's Wife.

entourage like the three kings. Von Appen created a series of backcloths, which floated from the flies and cut across the revolve stage upon which Grusha escaped to the mountains. Scenery was minimal, but aesthetically attractive. Props were selective, made to suggest, not naturalistic detail, but rather dramatic potential. And masks were used for socio-political reasons: the rulers' faces were frozen, where the faces of the lower classes were expressive.

Music played a distinctive role in this, as in so many of Brecht's produc-

tions. He suggested that the song at the end of the first act should be 'cold', so that Grusha could act 'against' it as she decided to take the child: the comparison with Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* was thus reinforced. For the Flight to the Northern Mountains, 'the theatre needs driving music which can hold together this very epic act. However', Brecht continued, 'it should be thin and delicate.'[91] The music reinforced the tension in this chase which reached its climax in the escape over the rotten bridge. The songs in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* were not as crudely separated as they had been in some earlier productions, like *The Threepenny Opera*, but they still performed the function of interrupting the action, even when, as now, the actors 'acted' (mimed) what the singer described, or themselves sang emotionally. The song changed the focus and the rhythm and refreshed the drama as well as the spectator.

The acting stunned many spectators. Angelica Hurwicz's Grusha had the frantic urgency of Bruegel's *Dulle Griet*, yet the patient stoicism of a peasant wife. Helene Weigel, as the Governor's Wife, sat still and barely raised her voice, yet commanded all those about her, and the stage and auditorium as well. Brecht's own careful description of the Prologue shows something of the unforced simplicity which the production achieved:

> For the members of the kolkhoz 'Galinsk', the destruction of the farm is hard to understand. Nobody disputes the fact that it was permissible, but the deed cannot be accepted happily by the owners who have now returned. There is an oppressive pause, and the group that has gathered together for the discussion now divides into two kolkhozes. The expert notices the oppressive mood and covers up the difficult situation. In a dry and businesslike manner, she begins to read the protocol. The circumstances under which the irrigation plan originated have great significance for the course of the discussion . . . There is a pregnant pause. The old farmer from the kolkhoz 'Galinsk' gets up, covers the considerable distance to the group from the kolkhoz 'Rosa Luxemburg' and shakes hands with the young tractor driver. There is applause on both sides: for the defenders of the homeland and for the farmer who acknowledged the arguments of the defenders.[92]

It was such careful, yet carefree, performance that enabled Brecht's work to make its intellectual and emotional impact.

Brecht after Brecht

In 1949 Sir John Gielgud, having just read an essay by Brecht, wondered aloud: 'Mr Brecht presumably writes his own scripts, and it might be

Figure 4.4 *The Threepenny Opera*, Berliner Ensemble, 1964.

interesting to see a performance of one of them.'[93] A quarter of a century later, plays by Brecht featured on the *English* Literature 'A' Level syllabus. But a quarter of a century after that, with the implosion of Communism and the world struggling in the wake of Reaganomics and Thatcherism, few playwrights stirred less enthusiasm than Brecht. It was an extraordinary switchback ride, which needs some explaining.

Initially, Brecht's legacy was left in the hands of the Berliner Ensemble, who were charged with staging his plays and proselytising his working methods. Helene Weigel retained the managership of the company, and a group of young directors, headed by Manfred Wekwerth and including Benno Besson, Peter Palitzsch, Joachim Tenschert and, later, Manfred Karge and Matthias Langhoff, together with brilliant actors like Ekkehard Schall and Wolf Kaiser, pushed the work forward.

In 1960 the company again won the First Prize at the Théâtre des Nations, Paris, and through the 1960s they were generally regarded as the world's leading theatre company. But already accusations of playing safe and becoming more museum than living theatre were being heard. In 1969, Wekwerth left after a bitter dispute, and when Helene Weigel died in 1971, Ruth Berghaus became artistic director. She brought something of a new broom, staging, for example, *Cement* by the much-banned playwright, Heiner Muller, and enlisting new directors like Einar Scleef and B. K. Tragelehn. But this was too radical for the East German Communists, and in 1977 Manfred Wekwerth, admirably acceptable and soon to become a member of the ruling Politbureau, returned. His own work, like his new version of *Mother Courage*, was often poorly received, but he employed Heiner Muller, whose 1988 production of Brecht's fragmentary *Fatzer* was widely acclaimed. It was, however, the dying fall of the old Communist-created company. To many, by the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the Ensemble was bloated, stagnant and directionless.

In West Germany, indeed across Europe (and America), a not dissimilar pattern was discernable. In the twenty years after Brecht's triumphant *Mother Courage* in 1949, there were no fewer than 478 different productions of Brecht plays in West Germany, even though during this time there were at least three (incomplete) boycotts of his work – in 1953 after the East German workers' rising, 1956 after the invasion of Hungary, and 1961, when the Berlin Wall was built. *Mother Courage* alone received sixty-six different productions in this period to 1968, *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti* fifty-three and *The Good Person of Setzuan* fifty-two. As the truth about Soviet Communism came to be more clearly recognised, dissatisfactions with the post-war settlement rose to the surface, new freedoms associated with peace marches, 'flower power', and rock music were discovered, and Brecht seemed to offer a timely, refreshing, and intellectually honest form

of left-wing theatre. But (to cut a complicated history short) the 1968 'revolution' in Germany and France failed, and suddenly there seemed to have been just too many Brecht productions. 'Brecht fatigue' set in. Though West German theatre was still capable of astonishing productions, such as Peter Stein's 1970 *Mother* in West Berlin, which demonstrated the effectiveness of Stein's concept of collective work, Jurgen Flimm's *Baal* in Cologne in 1981 and Manfred Karge's *Mother* at Bochum in 1982, many German practitioners stopped engaging with Brecht's ideas, and the writer Peter Handke referred contemptuously to Brecht's plays as 'fairy tales'.

Nevertheless, in West and East Germany, the Brechtian example had informed, and sometimes inspired, a generation of unusual and interesting playwrights, including, in the West, Martin Walser, Thomas Bernhardt, and Franz Xaver Kroetz, and in the East, Helmut Baierl, Volker Braun, Peter Hacks and, of course, Heiner Muller whose statement – 'to make use of Brecht without being critical of him is to betray him'[94] – showed both the problem and the potential of writing after Brecht. The problem in the East may, paradoxically, have been reduced by the Berliner Ensemble's dog-in-the-manger attitude which prevented other companies in that half-country from presenting his work. Muller was profoundly helped, too, by his collaboration with the French director, Robert Wilson.

The Berliner Ensemble visited London in 1956. Its impact was immediate and stunning. Playwrights like John Osborne and Robert Bolt, although certainly not 'left-wing', nevertheless embraced 'alienation'. Theatres of all descriptions scrambled to present the great East German. After what seemed like an age of well-made plays and drawing-room comedies, theatre suddenly became relevant to the real social and political problems of life. With gathering momentum, with much enthusiasm but somewhat less understanding, Brecht came to dominate much of British theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the best productions probably included Bernard Miles as Galileo at the Mermaid Theatre in 1960 and as Schweyk in *Schweyk in the Second World War* in 1963; the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1962; and *Happy End*, directed by Michael Geliot, initially at the Edinburgh Festival, later at the Royal Court, London, in 1965. In 1969, Michael Blakemore presented a brilliant *Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre, and London's Half Moon Theatre did a similarly memorable *Mother* the following year.

Brecht was by now not only on the school syllabus, his work was performed ubiquitously, from the National Theatre to the new 'theatre-in-education' companies, to amateur and student groups, and even to school plays in new comprehensive schools. Inevitably, Brecht influenced other theatre work too. The Royal Shakespeare Company's *Wars of the Roses*

sequence in 1963, and Peter Brook's production of *The Marat/Sade* the next year, were both enriched by their intertextual relations with Brecht, and the work of playwrights such as John Arden, especially in his earlier work, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, and Howard Brenton all benefited from their understanding of him. It was only later, in the 1980s and 1990s, when Margaret Thatcher dominated the country and leading actresses like Judi Dench and Glenda Jackson found themselves 'failing' with Mother Courage, that the reaction could be seen clearly to have set in.

In France, the Comédie-Française and the regional theatres alike staged Brecht through the 1960s and 1970s: statisticians noted that in 1972 Molière was the most frequently staged playwright in the country, followed by Shakespeare, and then Brecht, ahead of Chekhov and Marivaux. Perhaps thanks to Jean Vilar, who had directed *Mother Courage* at the Théâtre National Populaire as early as 1951, and who also created a brilliant *Arturo Ui* at the time of de Gaulle's war against Algerian independence, French theatre seemed to have discovered a lighter, perhaps more cynical, Brecht than elsewhere, with some notably adventurous productions, including *Baal*, directed by André Engel in Strasbourg in 1976, and *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*, directed by Georges Lavaudant at Grenoble in 1978. In some ways more significant were a number of brilliant French productions of work by other playwrights who owed much to Brecht: Roger Planchon's 1957 production of *Paolo Paoli* by Arthur Adamov was an early example; Ariane Mnouchkine's 1986 production of Hélène Cixous' *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk roi du Cambodge* a later, but no less challenging one. And French film of the period, especially the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Marie Straub, consistently acknowledged the depth of its debt to Brecht.

Russia embraced Brecht a little later than the rest of Europe, but by the late 1960s he was as popular there as anywhere. Two productions of note may be mentioned. In 1960, Maxim Shtraukh directed the country's first *Mother Courage* at the Mayakovsky Theatre in Moscow. The protagonist was played by the former Eisenstein protégée, Judith Glizer, who, at the end of the play, started to drag her wagon off, but fell down dead. Purists were appalled, but Shtraukh's reasoning, that Brecht's 1938 conception, pre-war and during the heyday of Hitler and Stalin, was no longer valid in 1960, could have been debated more generously. The fact was, however, that Brecht was considered too significant, perhaps too sacred, to interrogate in such a way, and this attitude of reverence pertained well beyond Russia. In 1963, Yuri Lyubimov burst onto the Moscow theatre scene with an extraordinary production of *The Good Person of Szechuan* with a student company, later to form the core of his troupe at the Taganka Theatre. Lyubimov had not seen a Brecht production before. He played the drama on

a virtually bare stage, and used placards, some, with legends like 'Brecht' and 'Street Scene', permanent, and others, announcing the scenes, changing. He used music, mime and a sharply stylised approach to the acting:

> Exits and entrances were choreographed in a disciplined, military manner, often describing rectangular movements on stage, thus precluding any illusion of an accidental or naturalistic occurrence . . . Inna Ulyanova, who played the house-owner, employed a series of ironic gestures to define her role. She tried to use her female charms on Shui Ta by pulling up her skirt when seated on the table, and by indicating her silhouette when referring to her 'business affairs' with him.[95]

Most controversially, Lyubimov's gods were Soviet bureaucrats.

In Italy, Giorgio Strehler mounted a series of Brecht productions, commencing with a *Threepenny Opera* in 1951 which won Brecht's own imprimatur. In India, Badal Sircar found a way of using a Brechtian approach to Indian material, and in South America, Brecht's work was a seminal strand in Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. In the United States, where Eric Bentley, H. R. Hays, and a few others persistently advocated Brecht against a pervasive anti-Communism, Brecht was perhaps particularly noticeable in forwarding the careers of a number of women directors, including Judith Malina, who directed *He Who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No* as early as 1951, and whose highly acclaimed *Antigone*, premiered in 1967, stayed in the repertoire of the Living Theatre for over twenty years: 'Wherever we played it, it seemed to become the symbol of the struggle of that time and place – in bleeding Ireland, in Franco's Spain, in Poland a month before martial law was declared, clandestinely in Prague'.[96] Other American women who were successful with Brecht were Zelda Fichandler, who directed *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Washington in 1961, and Nina Vance, who presented *Galileo* in Houston, Texas, in 1962. Brecht, however, was never as omnipresent in America as he was in Europe, and by 1987 at Stratford, Ontario, *Mother Courage*, played to houses just 26 per cent full.

By then, of course, the world had had enough, not just of Communism, but of Brecht, too. It had, like Guzzler Jake in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, gobbled so much of him, it simply had to spew him out, or burst. His star, like the political philosophy to which he had apparently tied himself so tightly (had not official Communism's most favoured cultural son, Georg Lukács himself, given the oration at Brecht's funeral?), fell as rapidly as it had risen. There were other factors too. The modelbooks undoubtedly inhibited experiment. The 'Brecht industry' (books, articles,

televised cultural clichés, and so on, as well as productions of the plays) lent a blanket conformity to anything 'Brechtian'. The 'Brecht style', the half-curtain, the 'worn' authentic props, the pseudo-peasant pastel greys and fawns of costumes and props, created a theatrical uniformity which became excruciatingly dull, while the 'Brecht method', including hackneyed V-effects and anticipated gests, sank into a morass of orthodoxy. What was more, the whole Brecht 'enterprise' was grossly constricted by the policy of his heirs, who forbade any experimentation. For instance, anyone wanting to perform Brecht's experimental montage of scenes, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, was only permitted to present the authorised scenes in the authorised order. Brecht, the embodiment of experiment, had become a cultural mausoleum. Ironically, he resembled nothing so much as the Beyreuth Wagner, when his descendants' ban on experimentation virtually killed the *Gesamkunstwerke*. The nadir was reached with a lurid and moralistic biography, in which Brecht was virtually held responsible for both the Second World War and the continuance of the gulag, which enterprises he seemed to have prosecuted while his exploited and besotted mistresses, unable to think for themselves and working to Brecht's orders, wrote the 'great plays' between them.[97]

But then some unexpected chinks began to appear, not least in a reassessment of Brecht in the light of new critical and philosophical ideas discussed in the 'Twenty-first-century perspectives' section below. But in the theatre too, despite the continuing restrictive hold of those with copyright powers, some progress was hesitantly made.

In 1992, with a much trimmed work force and under a new management team of Muller, Palitzsch, Langhoff, Fritz Marquardt, and Peter Zadek, the Berliner Ensemble was effectively privatised. Leaner and more focused, it certainly acquired a new energy, and Muller's production of *Arturo Ui*, with the brilliant Martin Wuttke in the title role, was seen and admired across the world. True, by the end of the century the Ensemble needed further reorganisation, and Claus Peymann, formerly of the Vienna Burgtheater, was appointed artistic director. A new policy directed towards contemporary work bore fruit early in 2000 when George Tabori's *Brecht-Akte*, about the CIA's pursuit of Brecht in America, was staged, but still Brecht (including a revival of Muller's *Arturo Ui*) continued to dominate. Still, the Ensemble installed a Theatre Playground for children, and a Flying Classroom, where actors and directors met the public to discuss their work. But whether it could – or should – become anything more than a house of homage to its founder is difficult to argue.

Nevertheless, by the end of the century, it was noticeable that the epic 'idiom' pervaded contemporary theatre, often unacknowledged. Most obviously it was seen in the emphasis on *what happens* to the diminishment

of interest in, say, a character's past or personal psychology. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, all created dilemmas based on their characters' *pasts*. It is Freud's position. And Ibsen always asserted that, no matter how much he seemed to be arguing for women's rights or other progressive causes, his *primary* subject was the individual in society. Today, almost invariably, the emphasis is the other way round. As Fredric Jameson has suggested, 'Brecht's thought is present everywhere today without bearing his name and without our being aware of it.'[98]

And there are other straws in the wind. One noticed that in the summer of 2002, the hottest off-Broadway ticket in New York was for a production of *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*, starring Al Pacino. And at the same time in Scotland a small-scale touring production of *The Good Person of Szechuan* was unexpectedly well attended and inaugurated eager community discussion.

Twenty-first-century perspectives

By the end of the twentieth century, Brecht seemed 'dead' to many. He had acquired the status of 'classic' and his plays, though no doubt interesting, were no more (and no less) relevant to today's politics, societies or aesthetics than were, say, Buchner's *Woyzeck* or D. H. Lawrence's *The Daughter-in-Law*. He was said to have held and presented a simplified view of life. The Marxism he had espoused all his life had disintegrated in Moscow, and his avant-garde Modernism was outdated and gauche in a time of international mass culture, global consumerism, and the world wide web.

Yet already, for those with their ears to the ground, a new kind of investigation around Brecht was beginning, and in the twenty-first century perhaps a new kind of Brecht is emerging. Note has been taken of the fact that Brecht was an inveterate experimenter – he published his works under the title *Experiments* – and after the 1960s, perhaps, it began to be noticed that his output was considerably more diverse, and more challenging, than a number of 'great plays' fit for national theatres. He wrote stories, plays (of various sorts), novels, poems, songs, diaries, theory, political analyses, cultural commentary, philosophy. His mode of production was fundamentally collaborative, and most typical of his creative work was its characteristic reworking of pre-existing material. He re-possessed older plays, and was notoriously lax about 'plagiarism', so that he affords a rich mine for diggers after intertextuality.

In addition, Brecht was never happy to consider any work of his 'finished': he wrote and re-wrote tirelessly. His extraordinary rehearsals at the Berliner Ensemble perhaps aspired to be 'endless'. His only certainty was doubt. His work on one level appears extraordinarily 'modern' in that it

challenges individual conceptions of identity, and indeed asks what we mean by identity. All of which suggests that he is a remarkably suitable body for dissection by contemporary theorists.

And indeed he had seemed so to some as early as the 1950s. Roland Barthes applauded Brecht's idea of the gest, grappled with his concept of 'demystifying', and pointed out the politics of the sign. For Barthes, Brecht offered a system (a 'readerly' text) which the Structuralist could analyse, while denying the possibility of 'final' meaning (in this sense producing 'writerly' texts). Brecht's irony and his self-reflexivity were further elements Barthes enjoyed, and indeed his *Mythologies* is profoundly Brechtian in its method.

Brecht also provided a paradigm for the emerging Feminist theatre movement. Lizbeth Goodman noticed that just as Brecht's work did not fit the 'apparatus' of German theatre in the 1920s, so Feminist theatre did not fit the theatre apparatus of the western world in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Perhaps as a consequence, his collaborative method was developed most consciously, and most successfully, in women's groups. His theory, too, helped those feminists who argued that gender is a social construction: Shen Te-Shui Ta played by a man is a very different proposition to Shen Te-Shui Ta played, as is usual, by a woman. And Brechtian historicisation also proved a useful tool for Feminist theatre practice which sought to unearth and deconstruct the oppressed position of women in history. The heart of his writing sometimes seems to parallel, and be extended by, writing by women such as Hélène Cixous, with her facility in exposing contradictions. And Sue-Ellen Case pointed out that Brecht's epic form has an inherently female dimension as compared to the subliminal maleness of tragedy. Where the structure of tragedy is comparable to – even modelled on – the male sexual experience, proceeding from foreplay to arousal to ejaculation, the structure of epic is more like the female experience of multiple consecutive orgasms.[99]

Another challenging theatre project infused with the knowledge and spirit of Brecht was Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. Taking his cue from Brecht, Boal asserted the manipulative oppression of Aristotelian theatre, from the Greeks to soap operas, and proposed not just a theatre in which the audience could *think* their way out from under this hegemony, but one in which they could *act* against it, in a 'rehearsal of revolution'.[100] Boal's ground-breaking and positive work and ideas have become widely available through a series of thought-provoking books.

Meanwhile, in more academic circles, Brecht has begun to provide unexpected areas for examination. Thus, the old 'three-phase' Brecht, conjured out of a biographical reading (early anarchic works, middle-period austere Marxist *Lehrstücke*, and 'mature' great plays, all knitted up

theoretically in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*) was challenged by Elizabeth Wright, who saw his fragments, revisions, and notes as often more revealing than the *Short Organum* and centred a critique in the often disregarded *Lehrstücke*. She showed how the early plays operated deliberately to disrupt and decentre, and this enabled her to deconstruct the conventional boundary between comedy and tragedy. Wright believed that, for various reasons, Brecht's more radical ideas had not fertilised his later work, and that only in the later, less 'tidy' productions of Heiner Muller and Pina Bausch had these ideas begun to bear the appropriate fruit.

Steve Giles deconstructed the *Threepenny* 'Lawsuit' and its ramifications to reveal the genesis and perhaps the significance of Brecht's Marxism, which he also related provocatively to problems associated with the mass media and to post-modern and post-structuralist theory. Fredric Jameson highlighted Brecht's 'showing of showing'. He suggested that the shape of Brechtian thought derived specifically from the acting out of stories, with a V-effect which inevitably leads to 'choosing'. Indeed, the *Lehrstücke* he characterised specifically as 'machines for choosing'. Jameson's Brecht has something in common with the traditional Buddha, who said:

> My teaching is a method to experience reality and not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. An intelligent person makes use of the finger to see the moon. A person who only looks at the finger and mistakes it for the moon will never see the real moon.[101]

Sarah Bryant-Bertail attempted a contemporary assessment of 'the Brechtian legacy' which widened the scope of enquiry to include Piscator's 1920s work and also some post-Brechtian stagings by Stein, Mnouchkine, and others. Her work complemented Steve Giles's in its deconstructing of the mass media, especially representations of war and capitalism, and suggested that theatre is perhaps uniquely placed to act as a forum for the critiquing of contemporary crises.

Inevitably, these comments provide only the tiniest peephole into some contemporary philosophical and critical approaches to Brecht. But it is instructive that at last his whole oeuvre is being interrogated, and through it new and fruitful ways of thinking about identity, culture, politics, and society are being found.

Further reading

Brecht's works are published in Berlin and Frankfurt, in Germany, in a series so far stretching to thirty volumes: *Bertolt Brecht Grosse kommentierte*

Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, Berlin and Frankfurt: Aufbau and Suhrkamp.

Methuen has published almost all Brecht's plays in English translation, in a series of eight volumes of the Collected Plays. A ninth volume, containing adaptations, was published in the United States in 1973, but has not yet appeared in Britain. In addition, various single volumes and other translations of the plays have been published.

Methuen are also responsible for the ongoing publication of Brecht's 'Plays, Poetry and Prose', of which the Collected Plays are a part. This series, originally edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim, and now by Tom Kuhn, includes four volumes of poetry, one volume of short stories, *Diaries 1920–1922*, *Journals 1934–1955*, and *Letters 1913–1956*. Brecht's *The Threepenny Novel* was published in England by Penguin in 1961, though the translation first appeared in the United States as *A Penny for the Poor* in 1937.

Methuen have also published significant selections from Brecht's theoretical writings, most notably in:

Kuhn, Tom, and Giles, Steve, *Brecht on Art and Politics* (first published 2003).
Silberman, Marc, *Brecht on Film and Radio* (first published 2000).
Willett, John, *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic* (first published 1964; reprinted many times).

Methuen also published *The Messingkauf Dialogues* originally in 1965, and it has been reprinted several times since.

Critical analysis and discussion about Brecht is carried on in the annual publication of the International Brecht Society, *The Brecht Yearbook*.

Critical books about Brecht are too many to enumerate, even if one were to confine oneself to books written in English only. Notoriously, there has been something of a 'Brecht industry' in the half century since Brecht himself died. What follows is one reader's selection of the most interesting of these works from the last fifteen years or so:

Brooker, Peter, *Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry, Politics*, London: Croom Helm, 1988.
Bryant-Bertail, Sarah, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre*, Woodbridge: Camden House, 2000.
Giles, Steve, *Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory: Marxism, Modernity and the 'Threepenny Lawsuit'*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1998.
Giles, Steve, and Livingstone, Rodney (eds), *Bertolt Brecht: Centenary Essays*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998.
Jameson, Fredric, *Brecht and Method*, London: Verso, 1998.
Kleber, Pia, and Visser, Colin, *Re-interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Martin, Carol, and Bial, Henry (eds), *Brecht Sourcebook*, London: Routledge, 2000.

Suvin, Darko, *To Brecht and Beyond: Soundings in Modern Dramaturgy*, Brighton: Harvester, 1984.

Thomson, Peter, and Sacks, Glendyr (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Wright, Elizabeth, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-presentation*, London: Routledge, 1989.