



Brecht's Theories in Fiction

Past scholarship has abundantly illustrated that Bertolt Brecht was not only a frequent subject of scholarly investigation—one is tempted to say “*Brecht und kein Ende*”¹—but that he has also bestirred the pens of creative writers, both renowned and amateurish. Inevitably, his appearance in novels, dramas, and poems has also become a frequent topic of analysis. Gudrun Tabbert-Jones has tried to save Brecht from some of the more outrageous depictions;² Siegfried Mews has warned that Brecht was being canonized, while Julian Preece and a lesser scholar, namely I, have amassed literary portraits of the great dramatist, in turn benign, abusive, ambivalent and neutral.³

Yet even with this plethora of investigations, one aspect of Brecht - as a character in literature - has received scant or no attention. But, in fact, Brecht, the often -revolutionary theoretician, has also been portrayed in various literary works, but these treatments have been largely ignored by scholars. In tracing this additional dimension of Brecht, transformed into a literary figure, I found that here, too, an entire spectrum of interpretation becomes apparent. How could it be otherwise? His innovations are a thorn in the side of those who favored traditional or modern theories of drama different from Brecht's. On the other hand, his originality was celebrated by those who wanted to follow in his footsteps. I have concentrated on the former. Being dialectical, they are far

more interesting. And the very circumstance that Brecht's theories are being attacked argues for the fact that they are being taken seriously.⁴

I should like to begin with a drama by Eugène Ionesco, whose strongly-held theories of drama led him to become one of the pioneers of the "theater of the absurd." He tried to spread it with missionary zeal, was also taken more with Artaud's "theater of cruelty" and simply loathed Brecht's alienation effect and epic theatre. Out of his engagement for his own theories and his distaste for Brecht's, there emerged a drama that reduced Brecht in the final act of *La Soif et la faim* to the role of a buffoon. In the words of the Ionesco scholar Richard N. Coe "he [Ionesco] attempts to ... show – as in the frightening Tripp-Brecht episode in *La Soif et la faim* – that he is opposed, not only to a socialist ideology, but to all militant ideologies of whatever tendency; the result is to reveal a shrill and cynical political nihilism...."⁵

Let us quickly recall the setting of Ionesco's play. Jean, the protagonist, has wandered into an institution, which is simultaneously a monastery and a prison. He is "entertained" by a mini-drama within the drama. Two monks present a tortuous scene in which they assume the role of Tripp, a true believer in God, religion and Christianity, and Bertoll, an atheist and world reformer. Both characters within the mini-drama are starving and are continuously tempted to forego their beliefs by the prospect of a large, delicious bowl of soup. Ionesco shows us the fragility of their convictions by a hunger-induced renunciation of their principles. Brecht, who is our main concern here, becomes a worshipful convert to Orthodox Christianity and, more to the point, to traditional theatre

by taking part in a drama that flaunts alienation. The actors make us believe that the impersonators of Tripp and Brecht are actually their real-life counterparts.

Also, the play within the play continues Ionesco's attack on epic theater and on dialectic presentation. It repeats a polemic already introduced in an earlier drama, *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*.⁶ But in the latter drama, the satire goes one step further. It leads one of the features of epic theatre, the shuffling of chronology, ad absurdum. The forced conversion of Tripp and Brecht has been carried out not just once in the past (as we might expect in Brechtian epic theatre), but time and again, ad infinitum.

A second broadside against Brecht emerges from the newest means of communication, the blog.⁷ It turns a purposely banal plot into a parody of Brecht's alienation effect. The fictionalized Brecht inveighs against a planned theatrical production at a college campus, because of its failure to *verfremden* (the German term is part of the original). The farce's plot is sustained, if barely, by the hackneyed convention of a girl determined to marry for wealth, but then being dissuaded at the altar by her true love, a less affluent suitor. Brecht comes on stage as one of the critical observers of the play's rehearsal. He frequently interrupts the action with pedantic observations: "Besides, there is too much emotion in the ending, and I cannot have emotion in my *Verfremdung*. The audience would not be able to appreciate the ending of the show, because they would be too emotionally involved" (7). The authors of this farce also aim at another device of alienation and epic theater: the display of placards foretelling the action to follow. The leading actress objects:

Ms. Guy: But wouldn't the audience already know about what will happen next if I tell them in a poem that Kadeem's going to stop the wedding so he and I could get married?

Brecht: No, Miss Guy. The poem is there to help the audience detach themselves from the action onstage.

Guy: But this is a wedding! How are you going to detach yourself from a wedding? (5)

Brecht, the character in the play, has no ready answer for this sentimental objection, except to say "[t]his would be an excellent opportunity to see *Verfremdung* in practice." Towards the conclusion of the play, Brecht judges "[t]his is the worst thing I've ever seen." Given the crazy quilt of an utterly trite plot and Brecht's breaking an ugly butterfly upon a wheel, one is forced to concur.

In several creative works, the deconstruction of Brecht's theories is a subsidiary, but by no means a negligible theme. An example is the film *Abschied: Brechts letzter Sommer*⁸ (Farewell: Brecht's Last Summer). Scripted by the dramaticist Klaus Pohl and produced by the award-winning director Jan Schütte, it shows the dying poet during his last day of vacation at his picturesque GDR summer retreat in Buckow near Berlin. The unfolding of this day is meant to encapsulate the span of Brecht's lifetime. The fictionalized Brecht is surrounded by his wife and lovers, old and new, by his theater assistants, by the renegade Communist, Professor Wolfgang Harich, and by his daughter Barbara. The film

highlights the rivalries for Brecht's affection or attention, his political ambivalences, his disloyalty to the threatened Harich, and his last attempts at literary creativity.

He is shown composing one last elegiac poem, but is even more concerned with the Berlin staging of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The play, especially because of the prologue and epilogue, is one of the most didactic of his major plays. The film instrumentalizes Brecht's preoccupation with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a vehicle for refuting Brecht's theory: that dramas must carry a social or socialist message.

The means of undercutting Brecht's socialist message is accomplished by putting the dramatist's convictions in doubt. The film thereby echoes some critical attacks against Brecht. As one critic has characterized him, he is now a "famous political poet, who in 1956 has taken recourse from the oppressive reality of the GDR into self-pity and cynicism."⁹ One dialogue in particular can be taken as a reprise of that criticism: "Why are we here in the GDR? Wasn't that a mistake?" Brecht asks his wife. And as the fictionalized Wolfgang Harich puts it succinctly: "Whether it is Socialism or the Demise of the World – he doesn't give a shit. The main thing is whether it is the right thing for his theater" (The line occurs in the last third of the film).

Schütte, the filmmaker, in addition, employs both a symbolic action and a symbol to demonstrate Brecht's abandonment of a principle once championed. Measured by the film, Brecht has become the ultimate pragmatist, contemptuous of most members of his entourage; he only retracts one of his sarcastic insults in the course of the film. He

apologizes to Elisabeth Hauptmann because he needs her for the scheduled performance of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. In an interview, Schütte admits that this denigration of Brecht was precisely on his mind: “He used each of his women for a different purpose.” In short, in Brecht’s eyes, she has been relegated to a means towards a successful theatrical production. Finally Brecht, on four or five occasions, disconsolately searches for his proletarian cap. He can’t find it; his daughter, at the behest of his wife, has burned it. Brecht has divorced himself from his former stance as a self-proclaimed proletarian. While his drama *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* will still cling to the erstwhile socialist message, the erstwhile messenger no longer stands behind his once-held convictions.

Another broadside at Brecht’s theories is launched in a recent drama by Itamar Moses,¹⁰ which premiered at the Portland, Oregon Center Stage in 2003. It was published in the summer of 2008, in short, only a few weeks before this conference. The title of the play is *Outrage*. Nomen est omen. It knits together events taking place at the time of Socrates, Galileo, and Brecht, the latter among denizens of a New England university campus at the turn of the 21st century. The necessarily complex plot is successfully summarized by one of the reviews:

The story commences when a university receives a large grant that, among other things, funds computer enhancements. It's the first big coup for new Humanities Dean Kale... These are tools, she claims, when long-time professor Lomax...sees danger. He cautions that the surveillance capability inherent in key cards could be

misused. He fears that a grant conceivably could even dictate curriculum.

Nevertheless when pressured, Lomax agrees to deliver the vote in his committee.

Enter young Professor Rivnine...whose vote is needed, and political maneuvering ensues.

A student enters the fray. Steven is in search of a thesis topic. He is

[systematically] playing his professors with a system designed to make them come up with his topic...

Politics go down the line from dean to prof, and from prof to prof, and from prof to student. Meanwhile, in ancient Greece, philosophy progresses from Socrates...to Plato to Aristotle, while on a separate plane an investigation ensues as to who has, as Socrates did, the courage of his convictions. Concurrently in another part of time, the Inquisition moves from Galileo to humble Menocchio, a doubter...and on to Bertolt Brecht. The Holy Inquisition in its various incarnations moves through time; however in the present, different implements of torture are employed. Brecht directs his play, Galileo in L.A. He is critical of Galileo for recanting, but when put on the spot for his own activities, he capitulates to Tailgunner Joe [McCarthy].¹¹

The play is held together by its theme: the persecution of innovative intellectuals by dictatorial powers, be they the Inquisition or, as in the case of Brecht, the McCarthy Committee. Virtually all the characters are self-serving, even the persecuted and even the

producers of a play-in-rehearsal which carries the same title, *Outrage*, that was given to the entire drama.

At first glance, Brecht emerges as a sympathetic figure. As Norman Roessler put it: “We get a heroic Brecht who stands up to the outrage of Nazi barbarism, and who at the same time, unbelievably, comes across as crotchety yet lovable: something akin to a favorite uncle or a Yiddish-comedian with an acerbic wit, yet a heart of gold.”¹²

The dramatizer Moses satirizes epic theatre by means of dramatic devices both obvious and effective. The drama features an epic narrator, to no one’s surprise, a fictionalized Bertolt Brecht. True to the tradition of epic theater, but greatly exaggerated, the Brecht figure comes on stage burdened with a gigantic placard bearing his name. He interrupts the various sections of the play with his comments, some self-laudatory, but the majority of them banal. Seconds before the stage lights dim, he announces the impending intermission (78). Elsewhere he warns that Act I is starting (9), but pre-empts his cue when he announces Act II while the last scene of Act I is still in progress. He then commandeers two actors from the campus setting of the play to speak lines from *Galileo*, his play in progress. “Brilliant,” he exclaims. The actor thanks him for his compliment. But no, Brecht, the narrator, disabuses him: Brecht: Not you. It’s lucky that I am so brilliant (82).

Similarly, alienation, often brought about in Brecht’s plays through characters wearing masks, is led to absurdity when two of the campus figures, on the slightest of pretenses,

don the masks and costumes of Obi-Wan and Darth Vader from *Star Wars* (102). Also, satire at the expense of alienation occurs when one of the actors stumbles into

Verfremdung without knowing the concept:

Rivnine: If I overplay it [a line from Galileo] like that, it'll be obvious that I'm...

Brecht: What?

Rivnine: Acting.

Brecht: I'm glad we understand each other. Now: final scene! Go! (109)

And what of social criticism and reform? Brecht, as narrator, reminds us of his didactic plays when he foretells to the audience what these reforms will entail:

This play is a play about people who try to make the world a better place. As a result, rather a lot of those people are going to get killed. They die at every performance, and return, next time, to try again. And these deaths before your eyes, they will upset you. That's not prediction, it's an order: (Shouted.) They will! Upset! You! (8)

But he has a consolation for us towards the end of his declaration: “But I don’t get killed. I have to survive until the end, you see, to deliver an epilogue” (8). Almost needless to say, there is none. Brecht’s dire warnings are echoed, nay magnified, near the end of the play, when Laura, a student actress and a “subversive” à la Brecht, addresses the audience of her play:

Laura: Hi, I’m Laura! Thanks everybody for coming to my play! It’s really great to see all of you here. A few warnings before we get started. There will be smoke and flame on stage, and also strobe lighting, so if you have a respiratory condition, or epilepsy, or if you don’t like rapidly projected subliminal images of horrific atrocities, um, just keep that in mind. There will also be nudity, so any, like, puritanical hypocrites out there should just be warned. And the first eight rows will be getting wet, and, no, it’s not water. Also the exits are now locked. Please enjoy the show (107).

This deconstruction of Brecht’s often quintessential social message continues in the recent Broadway musical *Love Musik*.¹³ While the play, for the most part, confines itself to the usual denigrations of Brecht as a womanizer, money-grubber and slovenly dresser, it also scrutinizes, at one point, his opposition to bourgeois theater. In one and the same breath, he rails against “bourgeois success” but threatens to remove Weill’s score from

The Threepenny Opera in favor of the far more commercial tunes of Jerome Kern (MS II, 36).

Brecht, who freely juggled historical facts with creative invention – Hitler, for example, never visited the front lines in Russia, as a scene in *Schwejk* suggests – advocates (as the stage Brecht) this liberty-taking in *Outrage*:

Their lies [i.e., the distortions of history by the ruling classes] become the facts, or, at any rate, the record of the facts. Records exist, you see, whereas facts may not. Stories, on the other hand. Stories are the opposite of History. They are filled with invention to begin with, and then misinterpreted, and then rewritten, and nevertheless can contain throughout a kind of truth...As you might imagine, this presents a problem for Stories about History. Which comes first? The Story or the Facts? (79)

“A visionary observer,” he adds, “can stand above all of this...And by visionary I refer to myself” (80).

But the Brecht of *Outrage* turns into a veritable Beckmesser when he, as narrator, “discovers” chronological inaccuracies in the play’s depiction of the trial of Socrates and in the persecution of the heretic Menocchio. Consistency, the playwright Moses appears to be saying, was not one of the strengths of the theoretician Brecht.

At first glance, one of Brecht's theatrical theories has been kept inviolate: Brecht's way of constructing characters. Even his worst critics did not try to deconstruct his stage figures, perhaps because the alteration of a carefully constructed character is no easy matter. In literary history, it often took a highly skilled author, frequently a satirist, to turn a sharply delineated character inside out. Fielding's Shamela reversed our perception of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*; John Gardner's Grendel turned the villain of *Beowulf* into a credible hero; Friedrich Nicolai converted Werther, Goethe's tragic hero, into a comic figure. And the variations of archetypes, such as Don Juan, could and did fill volumes.

Now back to Brecht. Brecht had maintained that characters would show ambivalences, be dialectical, and be subject to "*Veränderung*" ("changeability"). In *The Threepenny Opera*, Polly, the chief protagonist, grows up in the sanctimonious, hypocritical atmosphere of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Peachum. Yet she becomes the willing paramour of Macky Messer, London's most notorious womanizer, continues to wax romantic ("Siehst Du den Mond über Soho"), turns into a hard-as-nails commandant of Mack's gang of goons, refuses to bail out her captured lover, but reverts to her role as an ever-loving mistress once her lover is pardoned.

It took a renowned poet and fellow-exile, the lyricist Max Hermann-Neisse, to remake the curiously complex Polly. In a fairly lengthy poem, he turns Polly into Olly and makes an outright whore out of the (at least outwardly) respectable petit-bourgeois woman, who, unlike Polly, is utterly consistent and even can discriminate in her various beddings

between client and lover – and yes, even between alpha and lesser lovers. Two excerpts from the poem follow in my translation:

Brecht right now I will imitate
perhaps even throw in Villon
even though Brecht does on me grate
but Olly she deserves a chanson
since she has no money and since she was sweet
and even on weekdays her hands are quite clean
and since she took all and sundry under her sheet
and even me didn't turn down
though she would rather have bedded old Will
I'm willing to yield her to Will all alone....
With an attorney she kept her head under control
As icy as Brecht did she screw
He must have thought it was his wedding night
but she was thinking only of you.¹⁴

If one can draw a comprehensive conclusion from the treatment of Brecht, the theoretician, culled from such a variety of productions, it features – despite the negative judgments – one common characteristic: Brecht was and is such a towering figure that he

simply can not be ignored. Whether he was the catalyst for fellow exile Max Hermann-Neisse or for his rival Ionesco, for emerging young dramatists or for his collaborator Kurt Weill—all these fellow artists had to find their own way by running up against the innovator Brecht. A scholar, investigating Brecht’s influence in France comes to a similar conclusion:

Jean-Paul Sartre hat einmal gesagt, jeder Autor seiner Generation habe – bewusst oder unbewusst – mit oder gegen André Gide geschrieben. Macht man die nötigen Abstriche, so kann man auch sagen: jeder zeitgenössische französische Dramatiker schreibt – bewusst oder unbewusst – mit oder gegen Brecht.¹⁵

[“Jean-Paul Sartre once said that each author of his generation wrote – consciously or unconsciously – with or against André Gide. If one makes the necessary subtractions, one can also say that every contemporary French author writes – consciously or unconsciously – with or against Brecht.”]

Perhaps we can even eliminate the adjective “French.”

Guy Stern

Wayne State University and Holocaust Memorial Center

28123 Orchard Lake Road

Farmington Hills, MI 48334

ad5422@gmail.com

¹ Quite recently, Friedemann Weidauer, the editor of *The Brecht Yearbook*, had occasion to say: “In fact, this volume reminds us of the vast number of questions that Brecht’s work has opened up and are still seeking answers...[and] to rediscover the excitement that Brecht’s work still, and in spite of everything, calls forth.” See his “Editorial,” *Gestus-Music-Text: The Brecht Yearbook* 33, ix.

² Gudrun Tabbert-Jones, “The Construction of the Sexist and Exploiter Bertolt Brecht” in *Brecht Then and Now: The Brecht Yearbook* 20 (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 248-256.

³ Julian Preece, “The Many Faces of B.B. in Fiction and Memoir: From Fleisser and Feuchtwanger to Canetti and Weiss,” *German Monitor*, 41 (1998), in *Bertolt Brecht: Centenary Essays*, ed. Steve Giles and Rodney Livingstone, 19-32. Also see Guy Stern, “Brecht in Literature,” *Communications from the International Brecht Society* 29.1-2. (2000): 57-62.

⁴ Stefan Soldovierei makes an analogous argument for films inspired by Brecht, even though critics try to minimize his influence: “It appears that for a politically engaged cinema there is no escaping the central questions formulated by Brecht either.” See Soldovierei’s review of Thomas Martin and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Brecht plus minus Film* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2004; includes DVD), in *The Brecht Yearbook* 30 (2005): 449.

⁵ Richard N. Coe, *Ionesco: A study of his plays* (London: Methuen, 1971), 106.

⁶ Eugène Ionesco, *Les chaises; farce tragique. Suivi de L’Impromptu de l’Alma; ou, Le caméléon du berger* ([Paris]: Gallimard, [1973]), 91-178.

⁷ “The Melonball Bounce.” [Fan Fiction](http://hillmanpit.wordpress.com/category/fan-fiction/), 13 Apr. 2004, 21 Jul. 2008
<<http://hillmanpit.wordpress.com/category/fan-fiction/>>.

⁸ *Abschied: Brechts letzter Sommer*, dir. Jan Schütte, writ. Klaus Pohl, perf. Josef Bierbichler, DVD, Arthaus/Kinowelt, 2001.

⁹ Karin Zintz, “Brechts elegischer “Abschied“.” *Rhein-Zeitung*, Film-Kritik, 10 Apr. 2001, 21 Jul. 2008
<<http://rhein-zeitung.de/magazin/kino/film/a/abschiedbrechtsletzttersommer/kritikdpa.html>>.

¹⁰ Itamar Moses, *Outrage* (New York: Samuel French, 2008).

¹¹ Kathryn Osenlund, "Outrage." *Curtain Up*, 2005, 21 Jul. 2008

<<http://www.curtainup.com/outrage.html>>.

¹² Norman Roessler, "The Incredible Lightness of "Seeing Brecht" on the Philadelphia Stage." *Electronic Communications from the International Brecht Society*, vol 36.1 Winter 2008, 6 Jan. 2009

<<http://www.ecibs.org/new/ecibs-361/incredible-lightness-quotseeing-brechtquot-philadelphia-stage>>.

¹³ The book by Alfred Uhry was kindly put at my disposal by Dave Stein, the Archivist of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music in New York. The internal annotation refers to the manuscript in the Kurt Weill Archive.

¹⁴ Klaus Völker, *Induktive Liebe, extensive Mitarbeit* in Inge Gellert, ed., *Nach Brecht: Ein Almanach 1992 vom BrechtZentrumBerlin* (Berlin: Argon, 1992), 87.

¹⁵ Henning Krauß, "Aspekte der Brecht-Rezeption in Frankreich" in Helmut Koopmann and Theo Stammen, Hrg., *Bertolt Brecht – Aspekte seines Werkes, Spuren seiner Wirkung* (Munich: Ernst Vögel, 1983), 219-238.