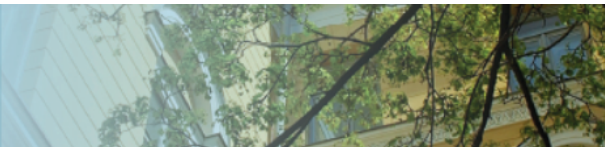


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“Ein Berliner” in America: Directing Approaches in Context

The Berlin director Heinz-Uwe Haus has been staging productions in the U.S. for nearly three decades, beginning with a production of “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” at Villanova University in November 1980. I have had the privilege of seeing many of these productions, notably at the University of Delaware and at Villanova and would like to present an overview of his work in America.

When Haus came to Villanova in 1980, he was charged with staging “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” and teaching a graduate theatre course in Brechtian acting and staging techniques. In the productions I have attended, there is a consistency that exemplifies the Brechtian principles that Haus addressed in this, his first graduate course for American students. I would like to focus on two of those principles as Haus has employed them in his Delaware and Villanova productions: first, what he characterizes as “physicalized” acting and, second, a sense of theatre as a community event, a conception that in his publications he has traced back to the ancient Greek theatre.

Prior to rehearsals for a specific production, Haus gives his student actors several weeks of intensive training in Brechtian acting and staging techniques. From the outset, he urges them to observe human behavior, look for contradictions in that behavior, and do improvisations on these observations. Then they are able to draw on these improvisations

during rehearsal. They learn to see the theatre as a “laboratory, a place for investigation [and] analysis,” as Carl Weber described Brecht’s own rehearsal process.¹ Haus encourages the actors “to go first one way and then to jump the other way [--sometimes literally--] and then to make it obvious that you’ve changed, that there is change in your world.”

When the audience entered the theatre at the premiere of his 2003 production of “The Good Person of Szechwan” at the University of Delaware, for example, they saw some ten actors standing motionless at the back of the stage area facing the bleachers on which the spectators sat. Precisely at 7:30 p.m. the actors let out an Expressionistic scream and began marching toward the audience with stylized gaits, deformed and dehumanized by their jobs. The actress portraying Shen Te not only marched toward the audience but was also engaged in a kind of shadow boxing, suggesting the play’s underlying premise that in modern society the poor must engage in a life and death struggle in order to survive.

The set for the production consisted primarily of a large metal cage representing the tenements of Szechwan and two smaller cages. Haus explained that he wanted to create a large open stage space so that his actors were forced to create the setting themselves. Later the large cage became Shui Ta’s tobacco factory, to which the workers marched like automatons in a style reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis” or Brecht’s 1932 film “Kuhle Wampe.”

In Haus's 1994 production of "Oedipus rex" at Villanova, the chorus became a central character who interacted with Oedipus, commented on the action and on occasion actively moved the action forward. Haus recruited a diverse group of twelve actors for the chorus, ranging in age from 18 to 70, some with extensive stage experience and some totally inexperienced. He spent several weeks with the members of the chorus before full rehearsals began, exploring, improvising, and transforming the disparate individuals into a rather grotesque entity. The chorus members also carried 18" wooden poles that they used to pound out "brutal rhythms" and punctuate the syncopated chants.

Haus frequently reminded the actors, "The success or failure of this production depends on the physicalization and unity of the chorus" and he once likened them to "a group of barbarians chanting around a fire." Moreover, Haus employed the ancient Greek technique of using masks to permit the actors to "get in touch with" their bodies, to experience and use them differently and more fully in performance. He also encouraged them to draw upon their own personalities and life experiences, and to go beyond a realistic interpretation of their roles.

The use of masks is quite common in stagings of "The Caucasian Chalk Circle." In the 1980 Villanova production, everyone except Grusha, Simon and Azdak wore simple cloth masks that gave them a grotesque appearance and underscored their lack of humanity and sensitivity toward others. In the 1992 Delaware production, everyone wore a mask except the child. Grusha's mask contributed to the "physicalization" of her performance in that it forced the actress to communicate the woman's character, her simplicity, her love for

Simon and the child, her bitterness and suffering, her ferocity in fighting for the child—in short, a whole range of emotions—solely with her voice and body language.

Certain aspects of Haus's 1999 production of "The Threepenny Opera" in Delaware were reminiscent of his staging of "Oedipus rex" at Villanova. At the beginning of the play the entire cast chanted the first stanza of the Ballad of Mac the Knife, just as the chorus in "Oedipus" had chanted the choral odes. In "Oedipus," the benches for the chorus in front of the first row of audience seats had blurred the line between audience and actors and made the audience a part of the action. In "The Threepenny Opera," carpenter's horses placed in front of the first row of audience seats had the opposite effect: they formed an artificial boundary between the audience and the world of Mac the Knife, especially when actors stepped in front of the horses to address the audience, and thus offered the staged world as an object for the audience's consideration and evaluation.

As a group, the members of Macheath's mob behaved like automatons, wishing the bride well with the same clichéd greeting while reporting their accomplishments sotto voce to Macheath, singing and moving in unison with extremely stylized movements reminiscent of Expressionist stagings of Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. When Macheath introduced them to the police chief Tiger Brown, the crooks didn't just put up their hands; they faced the wall and spread their arms and legs as if they expected to be frisked and handcuffed.

Haus's trademark "physicalized acting" was also employed effectively by the principal actors in the play. Mrs. Peachum utilized almost every inch of the stage, even sliding

down a banister on an entrance stairway. The strict separation of the musical numbers from the rest of the play called for by Brecht was underscored by improvised dances and the actors' stepping in front of or even straddling the carpenter's horses during their songs.

Brecht wrote "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui" in Helsinki in 1941, while he and his family were waiting for visas to the U.S. In his 1998 production at the University of Delaware, Haus invested the play with an invigorating physicality. The actors made use of every inch of the playing area from the moment the entire troupe entered through the audience and rushed on stage like a mob or a pack of jackals. At Givola's flower shop several of the gangsters formed part of the scenery: reclining on the floor with bouquets in their mouths, they became flower baskets. The scene in which Old Dogsborough vowed to resist Ui "as long as I breathe" while Ui snaked his legs up Dogsborough's body and wrapped his feet around his neck is another example of such physicalized performance.

Instead of using the scene titles that Brecht added to the play, Haus had the actors develop songs and movements out of an American context, from their own personal experience. Thus the title "Dogsborough's Country House," for example, was presented as a square dance.

Brecht's titles and the songs employed in Haus's production are alienation devices designed to discourage audience identification with the characters and stimulate critical

reflection. The most striking alienation device in the production, however, was Haus's selection of a young woman to play the role of Arturo Ui.² The casting of a woman in the role reminded the audience that, despite the parallels in the plot to 1920s Chicago and 1930s Germany, Brecht was not portraying either Al Capone or Hitler, but the essence of a fascist leader.

Physicalized acting was also evident in Haus's most recent production in the U.S., his staging of "The Life of Galileo Galilei" at the University of Delaware in March 2007. Once again he made use of the individual talents of his actors: singing, juggling, gymnastics, puppetry, drum-playing, etc. in new scenes involving the entire cast. The role of Galileo was not treated like a big starring role as it was when Ernst Busch played Galileo at the Berliner Ensemble in 1958. Instead, it was very much an ensemble performance that compelled the audience to constantly shift their visual and auditory attention. The audience sat on either side of a long stage. Two large banners with quotations from Galileo's "Discorsi" hung on the walls behind the audience. At the end of the recantation scene, the banners were ripped down, but then for the finale, the entire cast assembled on stage in two columns facing the audience and recited excerpts from Galileo's writings. Some lines were recited in unison, some solo, some words were elongated and chanted, and some lines were sung. Galileo the man was weak and surrendered, but as Haus's new finale demonstrated, his ideas lived on.

This brings me to the second of Haus's staging principles: the conception of theatre not so much as entertainment but as a community event. In an interview in conjunction with

his staging of “Oedipus rex” at Villanova, Haus stated that he wished to present the story as a visual event and a social event. Therefore it was necessary to make the chorus the focus of the action, since at the time of Sophocles the audience was the chorus and vice versa. Like Brecht and Shakespeare, Sophocles made use of a complementary double perspective in which the chorus members were both narrators of and participants in the action. In Haus’s staging, the chorus members occasionally sat down on benches immediately in front of the first row of audience seats so that the demarcation between actors and audience became blurred, so that the chorus made the audience feel a part of the action, an extension of the Theban community, and thus the chorus seemed to join the audience in reflecting public opinion.

This introduces another important element of the play: the political dimension. From the beginning of rehearsals, Haus told the cast members to look at news programs on television and to read the newspapers and news magazines to find parallels between the situations in the play and current historical events. Coincidentally, the 1994 elections took place in the U.S. in the course of the run of the production. One Philadelphia newspaper reported that voters were angry. It went on to say: “Although the opening line of the chant is clear, it starts to break into discordant choruses beyond that.” The newspaper was reporting on American politics, but at the same time it perfectly described the situation of the political leader Oedipus and the reactions of the chorus, the polis, to this situation—even in theatrical terms of anger, chanting and discord. The point, of course, is the Brechtian maxim that theatre should not transport the audience away from

their own reality but compel them to reflect upon the relevance of the events portrayed on the stage to their own lives.

In “The Good Person of Szechwan,” several of the principals (Shen Te, Shui Ta, Mrs. Shin and Yang Sun) wore modern Western dress to emphasize the relevance of the play to the 1990s world of the American audience. The actress portraying the Niece was dressed like Britney Spears (before her marriages and tabloid notoriety) and sang the Song of the Smoke like a rock star, using a lollipop for a microphone. This was one of the many examples of the alienation effect realized throughout the production. In this scene, the Niece’s performance made it clear that this was theatre while the allusion to Britney Spears called attention to the relevance of the play’s message: the fact that dire poverty exists in our world today and that only we, the spectators, can change things.

The role of Shen Teh was played by a tall, agile actress with curly, short blonde hair. As the compassionate Shen Teh she wore a long brown wig and was easily seduced by the pleas of the poor and Yang Sun’s sweet talk, but strutting around in a man’s short brown wig and a double-breasted suit she seemed to slip just as naturally into the role of the harsh evil cousin Shui Ta. Even if one anticipated the scene in which Shen Teh sings “The Song of the Defencelessness of the Good and the Gods” and transforms herself onstage into Shui Ta, it came as a shock when she ripped off her mask and wig and revealed this 21st-century actress before “becoming” a man. Here the script called for *Verfremdung*, which was heightened by Haus’s direction.

As staged by Haus, Yang Sun's Song of Saint Never Comes Day called to mind not only Eilif's sword dance in "Mother Courage" with its glorification of war, but also the blustering break-dancing of Eminem, connecting the Thirty Years' War with 21st-century America. The contemporary reference once again reminded the audience that only they have the power to create a better world in which the good and the poor can find justice.

In his program notes for his 1980 production of "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" at Villanova, Haus stated: "we know what the author's general intentions were for his play: to make clear aurally, visually and dramatically, the conflicts and contradictions between people caught up in history in a specific moment in time.... The entire first scene of the play ... directs the wisdom and morality of the ancient fable of the chalk circle to a concrete contemporary problem ...: who deserves most to get the Caucasian valley, the goat farmers or the fruit growers? ... For my American staging, I made one major decision: to cast a black actress in the crucial role of Grusha."

Haus's other major innovation in the 1980 production was the introduction of a camouflage parachute in several scenes. It was used, for example, to represent the river across which Grusha and Simon conversed, but it also served to connect the wartime period in which Grusha lived, in the minds of the audience, with Vietnam.

The casting of an African American in the role of Grusha underscored the fact that she was not the biological mother of the noble child and emphasized the question: To whom should the child rightfully belong? Haus retained the prologue in the Villanova

production, in contrast to most stagings of the play in the U.S., and thus conveyed Brecht's message that the child and the valley should belong to those who genuinely care for them.

For his 1992 staging of the play at the University of Delaware, Haus asked his graduate theatre students to collect newspaper and magazine articles, television and news accounts and reports from the World Health Organization and Amnesty International dealing with child abuse. In this way they were able to think of events in a contemporary context. The prologue was abandoned in this production and replaced by a chorus reciting, in free rhythms, the reports on child abuse around the world that they had prepared and thus showing the audience the connection between the world of 1992 and past events. Here Haus presented real, timeless human beings with problems and sufferings and forced the audience to think of present-day conditions.

When Haus staged "Mother Courage and Her Children" at the University of Delaware in 1995, through improvisation a chorus developed almost spontaneously out of the Epic Theatre titles that precede each scene.³ This "chorus" resembled an ancient Greek chorus not only in their rhythmic stomping and unison movement. They constantly confronted and accused the audience of their complicity in atrocities during the Cold War. "The actors used the entire theatre space and built no barriers between the audience and themselves."⁴ (27)

Haus urged his actors to seek the Brechtian contradictions in behavior, nowhere more evident than in the conflict in Mother Courage herself between her maternal side and her

business side. Toward the end of the play, Mother Courage sings her dead daughter “to sleep” and then viciously blames the peasant couple for killing her child. In Haus’s staging, the actress stoically unfolded an army blanket to cover Katrin’s body, then suddenly realized that she could sell her daughter’s clothes. Seized by greed, she stripped the corpse down to her underwear. The sight of Katrin, nearly naked, lying in a puddle, stunned the audience,⁵ and they had to ask themselves how greed or how the mere struggle to survive can reduce a human being to such behavior.

Brecht said that theatre should not only entertain but also instruct. For nearly thirty years, Haus has used in America Brechtian staging and acting techniques and the traditions of the ancient Greek theatre to move and to teach actors and audiences to see the relevance of theatre to the contemporary world.

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¹ Carl Weber, “Brecht as Director,” *Tulane Drama Review*, 12.1 (1967): 101-107.

² See Carine Montbertrand: “On Brecht and Working with Director Heinz-Uwe Haus” in

Heinz-Uwe Haus, *Notes on Directing* (Nicosia: Cyclos Theater Books, 2007), 23-32.

³ Kathleen Mary Doyle, "Contradictions and Conversions: Dramaturging Mother Courage and Her Children in the United States and Germany, Winter 1994--Summer 1995," *Communications from The International Brecht Society*, 24.2 (1995): 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.