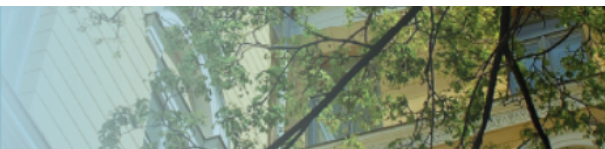


*Language and the Scientific Imagination*  
The 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference of ISSEI  
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)  
28 July – 2 August 2008



## **An Artaudian and Brechtian Analysis of The Living Theatre's *The Brig*:**

### **A Study of Contradictory Theories in Practice**

On a January evening in 1963 the stage director Julian Beck received a play entitled *The Brig* and immediately decided that it would be the next production his avant-garde troupe, The Living Theatre, was to produce. Written by Kenneth Brown, *The Brig* is a semi-autobiographical account of Brown's harrowing experience in a Marine Corps prison while he was stationed at Mt. Fujiyama in Japan between 1954-1957.<sup>1</sup> The production opened on May 15, 1963 under the direction of Beck's wife and company co-founder, Judith Malina, and would ultimately become a signature work in The Living Theatre's repertoire. Theatre critics readily recognized the piece's use of a highly visceral and emotionally engaging theatrical form in dialectic conjunction with a socio/political content that attacked society's various systems of hierarchical authority. *New York Newsday* described the performance as, "Shattering! Picasso's *Guernica* or a Hieronymous Bosch painting come to life," while *Variety* magazine pointed out that it was "written with relentless fury... a searing indictment of man's inhumanity to man." The acclaimed theatre academic Robert Brustein perhaps captured the evening best when he wrote:

An activist play designed to arouse responsibility... This ruthless documentary becomes an act of conscience, decency, and moral revolt in the midst of apathy and mass inertia. If you can spend a night in THE BRIG, you may start a jailbreak of your own.<sup>2</sup>

*The Brig* left its mark on the American theatre, as it was seminal in the development of the New York City avant-garde of the 1960s, and demonstrated The Living Theatre's effective use of experimental performance as a source of political action. As such, Beck and Malina seamlessly employed the contradictory aesthetics of two of the most significant theatrical theorists of the twentieth century: Antonin Artaud and Bertholt Brecht.

With the possible exception of the famed Russian director and acting teacher Constantine Stanislavsky, no theatrical theorist has influenced western theatre and performance in the twentieth century more than Bertholt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. Whereas Brecht's artistry began during the interwar years and came of age during his exile from his native Germany, Artaud's aesthetic, most notably exemplified by his seminal text *The Theatre and Its Double*, was written in the 1930s, yet did not gain widespread recognition until after his death in 1948. Indeed, Artaud's call for a "Theatre of Cruelty," a non-textual system that focused on the shared corporeal experience of the performer and spectator, therein intended to render a ritualistic encounter, was shunned by the major French theatre artists of his time (Copeau, Jouvet, Pitoëff). Conversely, Brecht's signature

theoretical contribution, the so-called “Epic Theatre,” a text-based system that required the spectator to use his/her analytical reasoning in consideration of pertinent political issues, was quite influential among his contemporaries. Both men, however, had a lasting impact on the theatre of the latter half of the twentieth century, as exemplified most particularly by the theatrical avant-garde of New York City in the 1960s.

Perhaps no group typified America’s alternative theatre movement of the 1960s more than The Living Theatre. Founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina in 1947, The Living Theatre is generally considered by scholars to be the quintessential example of American experimental theatre. Similarly to other avant-garde artists of the period, Beck and Malina were committed to using their art to address current socio/political issues such as opposing the Vietnam War, embracing civil rights, and condemning all types of violence.<sup>3</sup> They were self-described anarchists who were also pacifists, as indicated by their opposition to hierarchical systems of authority—a theme that is foundational to *The Brig*—as well as their commitment to universal love and harmony. They saw the modern world as a degenerative and soulless place in which individuals were alienated from oneself, nature, and the community: “We are trapped inside a masculine hunting society that is asserting its power by killing and we therefore must be sensitive to all forms of existence.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Beck and Malina created a theatrical company that responded to society’s ills by increasing awareness of its oppressive cultural conditions, most specifically the slavish adherence to institutional authority. *The Brig* proved to be a groundbreaking production that served this very purpose.

*The Brig* employed theatrical theories that can be traced to both Artaud and Brecht, despite the contradictoriness of their respective aesthetics. Therefore, this essay will attempt to locate elements of Brechtian and Artaudian theatrical theory in this production. Whereas Brecht's approach was didactic, and sought to "alienate" the spectator's emotional involvement with a piece, thereby causing him/her to critically respond to a given narrative and incite political action, Artaud's system was abstract, and created a visceral, mystical, and ritualistic encounter between the performers and the audience. Theatre scholars almost always consider their strategies as antithetical, and rarely does a theatrical work simultaneously involve both systems.<sup>5</sup> *The Brig* was exceptional in this regard. Like Brecht's plays, the piece relied on ensemble playing, exhibited Brechtian Gestus, and was definitively political. On the other hand, it echoed Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty by engaging the audience's senses by hypnotically encompassing them within the violent milieu of the brig, and coincidentally, transforming the theatrical space into a nightmarish madhouse. It was as visceral as it was didactic, as distancing as it could be cathartic. If Brecht's approach enabled the engagement of the spectator's critical reasoning, Artaud's paradigm can be seen in the ways Beck and Malina's troupe stirred his/her emotions. The end result was a rich experimental performance that was revolutionary for its time.

Brown's play depicts an ordinary day in a Marine Corps prison. Its structure consists of six scenes spread out through a pair of acts that spans from 4:30 AM to 7:30 PM. There are fourteen characters that are divided into two general categories: those that represent the prison authority (the Warden, the Guards, etc.) and the prisoners who obey them.

Unlike conventional dramas, *The Brig* does not employ a linear narrative, but instead is comprised of epic scenes—very much in the spirit of a Brechtian structure—that portray one harrowing event after another. For example, in one such scene prisoner #1 is forced to fall to his knees as #2 places a metal garbage can over his head, while dutifully following the orders of the chief guard to run circles around the can and violently pound it with its cover. As cacophonous clanging fills the theatre the audience is privy to a tortuous occurrence as one prisoner inflicts pain and humiliation on his peer. Adding to this mayhem, the remaining prisoners simultaneously march about the stage while indiscernibly shouting as they drop to the ground to do pushups at their superior's command. The atmosphere can be readily likened to Artaud's recommendations in his essay "The Theatre and the Plague,"

The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into extreme gestures; the theatre takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go.<sup>6</sup>

The extremity of abuse suffered by the prisoners, both psychological and physical, is expressed through rhythmic and corporeal means, and is likewise absorbed by the spectator, thereby executing a definitively Artaudian motif.

As exemplified by the abovementioned scene, violence was a running theme throughout *The Brig*. Despite the fact that Beck and Malina were pacifists, and their theatre company was dedicated to universal peace and harmony, they employed an excessive use of violence in this production. In doing so, they were borrowing from Artaud's recommendations for using the *mise en scene* for creating a performance environment that pushed the players and spectators alike to visceral, emotional, and corporeal extremes. According to Artaud every gesture, sound, mimicry, movement, set piece, and staging choice should be carefully designed to transform the theatrical space into a site of chaos and crisis. His theory rested on a metaphorical comparison to the horrors associated with the Marseille plague of 1720, in which widespread carnage and destruction caused all forms of social order and authority to break down and become replaced by a "shared delirium."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Malina and Beck used the sights and sounds of *The Brig* to invoke a violent milieu facilitated by the representation of a military prison. Every gesture, utterance, rhythm, stage grouping, and movement was part of a theatrical onslaught forcing the spectator to become unsettled to the point of sharing in this madhouse of pain and suffering. Just as Artaud's theatrical plague eradicated hierarchy—we are all prone to its deadly affects, regardless of one's social standing--- Malina and Beck's brig, despite its fictionalized hierarchical system, ultimately created a communal performance environment caused by an extreme use of violence.

Malina's vision for *The Brig* was very much informed by Artaud's theatrical theory. Indeed, in her production notes she claims that Artaud was "never absent" from her creative process.<sup>8</sup> Just as Artaud sought a performance experience steeped in "a

sensation of richness,”<sup>9</sup> a trait he appropriated from Balinese dance, Malina wanted her audience to be mesmerized into a cathartic trance that was marked by pain, suffering, and primal impulses. The acting ensemble’s use of cacophonous sounds, rhythms, and movements all contributed to this transformational occurrence. Nearly every scene would build to a strident crescendo of screaming, shouting, and noisemaking before subsiding into a dead and eerie silence. During the penultimate moments of Act Two Scene One, for instance, the prisoners create a chorus of scrubbing the floors, cleaning the windows, and stripping down the racks as their superiors shout orders and questions at them, thereby prompting a loud, concise, and obedient response:

Grace (one of the guards): Let me hear the music of those brushes. Elbow grease, my children, elbow grease. What’s the matter Four? I can’t hear your brush. It must sing in the suds, Four is that clear?

Four: [his arm going like a windmill]. Yes, sir.

Lintz (another one of the guards): I want all those racks made up and in place by the time the scrubbers arrive. Is that clear, rack detail?

Rack detail (consisting of several inmates): Yes, sir.

Tepperman (the head guard): That’s enough water, bucket man. Secure the can in the shower and draw your swab and bucket. Scrubbers, up three more feet. Swab, detail, get hot!

The Warden: Rub your arms off kiddies.<sup>10</sup> Are you happy window detail?

Window Detail (consisting of several inmates): Yes, sir.

The Warden: They are our windows you are washing is that clear?

Window Detail: Yes, sir.<sup>11</sup>

This chaotic scene functions as an Artaudian symphony of sound and movement. Acoustic modes of expression such as brushes rubbing against the floor, the scraping of squeegees on windowpanes, and various vocal utterances and shouts from a plurality of characters, both individually and in unison, collide with a frenzy of stage movement and physical gestures. The men on rack detail feverishly change the bunks as the window washers and floor scrubbers engage in the repeated and robotic gestures of completing their respective assignments. The guards traverse the space punctuating it both acoustically and visually by shouting directives, clanging their clubs, and ordering the inmates to race about the space to complete one arbitrary and senseless task after another. This mayhem underscores *The Brig's* signature themes of violence, torture, and the blind submission to authority. The prisoners are continually abused, humiliated, and dehumanized throughout this process. The scene's climactic moment features the prisoners "drilling" in unison, before the stage empties and returns to a deafening silence. As such, it can be traced to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, as Julian Beck notes in the introduction to Brown's play:



It is the torment of Artaud; it is the Theatre of Cruelty, this Brig; it is unbearable rather than compatible; it is horror rather than beauty; it is hysterical rather than reasonable.<sup>12</sup>

Drilling consisted of practicing the various techniques and compulsory exercises laid out in the *Marine Corps Manual*, a text that Malina used as a guide for creating *The Brig*'s disciplined atmosphere. According to the "Manual" drilling inspires Marines to function as "members of a team"<sup>13</sup> by stressing the need to instill the habit of following orders and executing tasks. Malina's cast spent numerous rehearsal hours simply going over the play's drilling regimen: marching, protocol for giving and receiving orders, and executing basic military tasks. According to the stage manager's notes, nearly half of a seven hour rehearsal call was spent on drilling, an approach that continued right up until opening night.<sup>14</sup> The precision of each stage movement and vocal utterance was carefully choreographed and "drilled" into every performer's muscle memory. For example, Malina described the ubiquitous gesture of a guard striking a prisoner with his club as a four-part action that included "The Moment Before Impact," "The Moment of Impact," "The Moment of Recovery," and "The First Moment of the New Status Quo."<sup>15</sup>

Although these carefully rehearsed movements and gestures had the affect of an Artaudian "trance" over the spectator and performers, this approach is also consistent with some of Brecht's recommendations for actors. In his essay, "A Dialogue About Acting," Brecht explains his system of performance, otherwise known as *Gestus*, in

which he stresses the actor himself must be foregrounded to the spectator, almost as if he were performing in “quotation marks.”<sup>16</sup> The fictional character and narrative were subjugated in favor of the components of the actor’s performance (the use of voice, speech, movement, and gesture), and dialectically positioned against the *mise en scene* (setting, costumes, lighting, and use of the theatre space). As a result, Brecht argued that the spectator could more aptly use his/her intellect in addressing the political themes of a given work; more so than would be the case if he/she were hypnotized into an Artaudian trance, or worse yet, became engaged in a cathartic state of empathy. Despite Brecht’s claim for an emotionally detached performance style, however, he wanted his actors to still be able to shock the audience and grate on their nerves, as long as it was indeed the actor’s persona that did the shocking and NOT the image of a character trapped in a fictional narrative: “It wouldn’t be his way of acting that would jar them, but he himself. He would grate on them. And yet a jarring element is one of the hallmarks of this new way of acting.”<sup>17</sup> We can therefore locate Brechtian motifs in Malina’s actors. Their attention to detailed movement—something Brecht stressed and Artaud did not—is in itself a citation of Brecht’s work with actors as evidenced by his own directorial projects. *The Brig*’s actors maintained a performative duality in which they created characters that induced a hypnotic trance over the spectator, yet at the same time they were prominently foregrounded. Their repeated movements, gestures, stage sounds, and vocal utterances possessed a highly stylized quality that symbolically underscored the culture of the brig, and by extension, what it represented socio/politically.<sup>18</sup> Every staccato movement, sharp gesture, group march, and violent scream served the dual function of viscerally shocking the spectator, while causing him/her to acknowledge the techniques comprising the

performer's work, thereby rendering a dialectic affect of appealing to the audience's most primal and cerebral faculties.

Like Brecht's performers, Malina's cast was an ensemble in the richest sense. They were unified in their commitment to her vision, and by extension the play's socio/political relevance. Similarly to Malina, they too believed that theatre could be a source for starting a revolution. As a result, the cast of *The Brig* agreed to Malina's unorthodox use of rehearsal rules that were based on the very regulations stated in the *Marine Corps Manual*. Just as the *MCM* carefully stipulated what was allowed and disallowed in the Corps, Malina created an adapted version for the purposes of rehearsal. Actors had to sign in before their call time, they were forbidden food and drink in the theatre, they were not allowed to converse about anything but the play, they had to remain in the rehearsal room throughout the call, even if their scenes were not being worked, and, like the Marines, they underwent a formal inspection of their clothing before rehearsal started.<sup>19</sup>

These rehearsal rules, otherwise known as "The Brig Regulations" were dutifully implemented. Malina had them printed on mimeographed sheets and distributed to her cast during their first meeting. In a strategy that would have been very agreeable to Brecht, she was aping the conditions of *The Brig* in rehearsal to better understand the larger theme at the play's center: the danger of mindlessly adhering to authority. Thus, rehearsals commenced in silence—a departure from the jovial and casual atmosphere akin to past Living Theatre productions--and the cast methodically went about their drilling exercises, which included actions specifically attributed to the culture of the brig

such as making bunks, brushing one's teeth, swabbing the floors, frisking a prisoner, reading one's *Marine Corps Manual*, and of course, beating a subordinate inmate. This approach created a creepy, yet effective transformation of the rehearsal space into the very brig the ensemble sought to represent theatrically. According to Malina's notes, these rehearsals were as thrilling as they could be exhausting. Nonetheless, actors would often sit around backstage afterward and decompress by discussing the day's work and its place in the process of developing a piece that would ultimately have significant socio/political meaning.

Perhaps as much as any work in their repertoire, *The Brig* exemplifies how The Living Theatre used performance for political purposes. Like Brecht, Malina and Beck had been greatly influenced by the agitprop director Erwin Piscator.<sup>20</sup> Their plight against the Vietnam War, hierarchical systems of power, and the general practice of violence became manifested in an aesthetic intended to incite a revolution. In this regard they could be distinguished from Brecht's political approach to making theatre, insofar as he was not trying to provoke his audience into an emotionally induced rebellion, but rather, he wanted them to objectively critique society's problems: "The epic theatre was likewise often objected to as moralizing too much. Yet in the epic theatre moral arguments only took second place. Its aim was less to moralize than to observe."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, despite Brecht's unquestionable commitment to theatre as a source of critical thinking towards causing political change, he was not given to emotionally induced extremism, as were Beck and Malina. Nonetheless, the foundational belief that theatre bore a responsibility to instruct its audience about social, political, and cultural matters remains consistent in

both Brecht and The Living Theatre. Perhaps this point is best demonstrated by the fact that *The Brig* landed Beck and Malina in prison and ultimately exiled to Europe, a move that Brecht would have understood all too well given his own resistance to authority and banishment from his native Germany.<sup>22</sup>

On the evening of October 19, 1963 agents from the IRS stormed the Fourteenth Street Theatre and arrested members of the company, including Beck and Malina, who in defiance of the authorities had locked themselves in the stage brig; a stroke of irony that could be readily described as Brechtian. The company was being charged for owing over \$28,000 in back taxes and the theatre was shut down, but not before Beck, in an act of civil disobedience, had ordered a final performance of *The Brig* earlier that evening. They were later placed under arrest and charged with eleven counts of impeding officers and IRS agents in the line of duty. Their trial was set for the following May.<sup>23</sup>

During the judicial proceedings, Malina and Beck engaged in outrageous behavior that was a piece of theatre unto itself. Among other defiant acts, they declined a court appointed attorney and chose to represent themselves, they deliberately disobeyed the judge's admonitions to not address witnesses by their first names, they constantly shouted or chanted to deliberately disrupt the proceedings, and in a moment of utter ridiculousness, Malina recited a poem in which she sexually fantasized about the prosecuting attorney. Similarly to other theatricalized trials of the 1960s, including that of their good friend Lenny Bruce, Beck and Malina turned the courtroom into a circus with themselves as the featured act. They were found guilty on seven counts of

obstructing justice and respectively sentenced to sixty and thirty days in prison. These sentences would never be served, however, as Beck and Malina went into self-imposed exile later that summer while touring *The Brig* in Europe.<sup>24</sup>

*The Brig*'s theatrical condemnation of authority can be likened to Beck and Malina's performative rebellion staged in the courtroom. Malina described their arrest as "An Artaudian experience...It was a Brechtian experience."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Artaud and Brecht's influence can be seen throughout the rehearsal, performance, and "performative" process of *The Brig*. While the production echoed Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty by creating an environment of emotional and sensorial extremes, it also demonstrated a Brechtian foregrounding of theatrical elements for the purpose of socio/political instruction. It was as visceral as it was cerebral, as intellectual and political as it could be ritualistic and primal. It is rare that these contradictory traits are fused into a single production. It is perhaps even more rare when it is successful. *The Brig* served as the precursor to many of The Living Theatre's future works, most notably *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* (1964) and *Paradise Now* (1968), both of which can be viewed through a Brechtian and Artaudian paradigm.<sup>26</sup> In describing the company's approach to balancing these two oppositional aesthetics Malina states, "matching these two elements, this physical element and this intellectual element seems to me to create an entire person."<sup>27</sup> As exemplified by *The Brig*, The Living Theatre proved that performance has the potential to strike a psychophysical symbiosis that renders a wholly human experience. Maybe that explains why Beck and Malina chose to name their organization accordingly. Their work can be defined as "living" on numerous levels, and as demonstrated by *The Brig*, they

effectively employed the contradictory techniques of two of the most significant theatrical theorists of the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive explanation of the production process of *The Brig*, see John Tytell, *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage*, (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 179-190.

<sup>2</sup> All review quotes taken from the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, NYPL, “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 32, Folder 1. Hereafter information cited from this archive will be documented as “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991.”

<sup>3</sup> Both Julian Beck and Judith Malina were strict vegetarians because they were averse to consuming the flesh of a living creature. In fact, Beck asserts that eating vegetables may also be an act of violence in Sheldon Rochlin and Maxine Harriss’s excellent documentary on The Living Theatre: *Signals Through the Flames*, Video (South Burlington, VT: Mystic Fire Video, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the renowned theatre historian Marvin Carlson claims that Brecht and Artaud’s positions are “diametrically opposed” to one another. See Marvin Carlson, *Theories Of The Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), 392-393.

<sup>6</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, Mary Caroline Richards, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 15-32.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 33, Folder 6.

<sup>9</sup> Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, 56.

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout the play the guards pejoratively refer to the inmates as “children,” “kiddies,” “maggots,” and “insects” as a way to further dehumanize and humiliate them. This is carried out as a form of psychological abuse with the intention of reinforcing the brig’s hierarchical culture.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Brown, *The Brig* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 33, Folder 6.

<sup>14</sup> This information was taken from the stage manager’s notes in “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 32, Folder 12.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from Malina’s notes, “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 33, Folder 6.

<sup>16</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht On Theater: The Development Of An Aesthetic*, John Willet, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 26-29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> The very stylized group movements and gestures of Malina’s actors can also be traced to the work of the famed Russian theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, most particularly his biomechanical system for training actors. For more on Meyerhold’s aesthetic, see Alma H. Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995); also Edward Braun, *The Theatre of Meyerhold: Revolution and the Modern Stage* (New York: Drama Books Specialists, 1979); and Robert Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Malina, Beck, and the company’s stage manager all took part in administering the clothing inspections. “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 33, Folder 6.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Malina spent several months during the winter and spring of 1945 studying with Piscator in New York City. For more on her experiences working with him, see “The Living Theatre Records, 1945-1991,” Box 52, Folder 1.

<sup>21</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht On Theater*, 75.

<sup>22</sup> With Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 Brecht went into exile and did not return to Germany until 1949, seven years before he died.



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<sup>23</sup> For a complete study on the political and legal controversy surrounding Beck, Malina, and *The Brig*, see Tytell, *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage*, 187-194.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, Beck and Malina wanted to perform *The Brig* in East Berlin at The Berliner Ensemble, but Brecht's widow, Helene Weigel, disallowed it. Also, see Tytell, *The Living Theatre*, 197.

<sup>25</sup> Sheldon Rochlin and Maxine Harris, *Signals Through the Flames*.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that The Living Theatre produced two of Brecht's plays during their history: *In the Jungle of Cities* (1960) and *Man Is Man* (1962).

<sup>27</sup> Sheldon Rochlin and Maxine Harris, *Signals Through the Flames*.