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Reincarnation; Or, How Bertolt Brecht Recreated Frank Wedekind

Jonathan Robert Glass, Jr.

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of Speech
and Drama at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

April 22, 2009

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Honors Thesis

Dr. Connelly

14 November 2008

Frank Wedekind: A Chronology*

1849: Friedrich Wilhelm Wedekind settles in San Francisco on a self-imposed exile.

1862: Dr. Wedekind marries Emilie Kammerer. Birth of their first son, Arnim.

1863: Frank Wedekind conceived in Oakland, California.

1864: On July 24th, Frank Wedekind is born in Hannover, Germany.

1872: The Wedekind Family moves to Switzerland because of Dr. Wedekind's continued political problems with Bismarck.

1875: Frank Wedekind attends the regional school in Lenzburg.

1877: First dramatic effort: *Eine Szene aus dem Orient 8 Akte, Verfasser Dr. F.*

Wedekind (A Scene from the Orient, 8 Acts, Author Dr. F. Wedekind).

1882: Earliest poems. Wedekind known to his friends as *Der Bänkelsänger* (The Ballad Singer).

1884: Wedekind enters the University of Lausanne, and then moves to the University of Munich where he studies law and German and French literature, but later leaves and takes a job as a publicity agent for the Swiss soup company, Maggi.

1886: Wedekind fights with his father and moves out of the house.

1888: Dr. Friedrich Wedekind passes away in October, which gives Frank Wedekind some financial freedom.

- 1891: Close association with Willi Morgenstern, born Rudinoff, an internationally known clown and pantomimist. Frühlings Erwachen (Spring Awakening) published but not produced.
- 1892: Total immersion in Parisian night life. Begins writing his Lulu play.
- 1894: After a visit to London, the Lulu play is completed. Introduced to Albert Langen, a German publisher.
- 1895: Albert Langen publishes Erdgeist (Earth Spirit). Faces harassment from the German censors because of Spring Awakening and Earth Spirit.
- 1896: Back in Munich. Founding of Simplicissimus, an underground satirical magazine. Affair with Swedish actress Frieda Strindberg, about to divorce her playwright husband, August Strindberg.
- 1897: Birth of first son, Friedrich Strindberg, from his affair with Frieda.
- 1898: The first three acts of his Lulu play plus one new act are produced under the title Earth Spirit. Wedekind, under a pseudonym, plays the role of Schöning. The Tenor is produced. Flees the country because of his anti-government poems in Simplicissimus
- 1899: Completes Marquis von Keith. In June, Wedekind is imprisoned for insulting the Kaiser, and finishes Mine-Haha, a novel while imprisoned.
- 1900: Wedekind released from prison in March; returns to Munich.
- 1901: Wedekind helps open and performs in cabaret Die Elf Scharfrichter (The Eleven Hangmen [Executioners]).

1902: König Nicolo, Wedekind's first completely "confessional" play is published.

Appears in Marquis von Keith.

1903: Hidalla published. Der Kammersänger becoming a popular repertory piece throughout Germany.

1904: The last two acts of his original Lulu play plus one new act are produced under the title Die Büchse der Pandora (Pandora's Box). Thus the play becomes two plays, best known in this form until 1988. For the two play version, Wedekind did much re-writing.

1905: A historic evening. Pandora's Box, which can be performed only "privately" for invited guests is produced by the great Viennese *littérateur*, Karl Krause: Wedekind as Jack, Kraus himself as Kungu Poti, Tilly Newes (later Wedekind's wife) as Lulu.

1906: Spring Awakening is at last produced, though much cut. Max Reinhardt is the director. In the cast are Alfred Moissi, Gertrud Eysoldt and, Wedekind's favorite actor, Albert Steinrück. Marriage to Tilly Newes. Birth of his first daughter, Pamela.

1906-1918: Wedekind had considerable success acting in his own plays, especially Hidalla. As a playwright, he concluded writing some rather conventional drama, three of them in praise of strong men of history or legend whom he admired—Hercules, Samson and Bismarck.

1908: Wedekind satirizes Langen in Oaha, Die Satire der Satire (Oaha: The Satire of Satires).

- 1909: Wedekind appears in a seven-play cycle of his works in Munich.
- 1911: Birth of his second daughter, Kadidja. Completes his “Faust” play, *Franziska*.
- 1914: Honored on his fiftieth birthday as the symbol of literary freedom. Ironically though, along with most of Germany’s leading writers, he expressed enthusiasm in print for the Kaiser’s war. Later, he remarked, “Sometimes one has to howl with the wolves,” and wrote some anti-war verses.
- 1917: Active as a guest performer in his own plays. In Zurich, the *Café Voltaire* is opened and *Dadaism* is born with Wedekind’s songs being sung as a part of the program.
- 1918: After having an operation to remove his appendix, Wedekind dies on March 9, 1918 from complications due to the surgery; he had developed appendicitis four years earlier. There is some debate about his death, with some scholars citing a hernia as the cause. According to Sol Gittleman, Wedekind’s funeral in Munich was attended by thousands (xii).

*Taken from Frank Wedekind’s The First Lulu translated by Eric Bentley and *Frank Wedekind* by Sol Gittleman.

Chapter 1: A Close Shave, Or Frank Wedekind as Brechtian Icon

Few modern playwrights have been as influential as Bertolt Brecht. His influence is felt from modern playwrights to the cinema. Brecht himself was influenced by many artists: playwrights August Strindberg and George Bernard Shaw, director Erwin Piscator, actor Charlie Chaplin, filmmaker Fritz Lang, and novelist Lion Feuchtwanger. His works also borrow from Chinese theatre, agit-prop, music halls, and the Bible. By Brecht's own admission, however, his greatest inspiration was Frank Wedekind. Brecht's first play, Baal, "also shows the influence of another great rebel among German dramatists, Frank Wedekind... who spent his life struggling for the sexual liberation of mankind...acted in his own plays and sang his ballads in the Munich cabarets" (Esslin 100). Brecht's idolization led him to create a play full of allusions to Wedekind. As a young man, Brecht was obsessed with Wedekind, describing him as a "ringmaster in a red tail coat, carrying whip and revolver, and no one could forget that hard dry metallic voice, that brazen faun's head with 'eyes like a gloomy owl' set in immobile features" (Brecht on Theatre 3). This description would become one which Brecht would emulate. This beautifully poetic vision characterizes Brecht's romantic fascination with Wedekind, bordering on hero worship: "Like Tolstoy and Strindberg he was one of the great educators of modern Europe. His greatest work was his own personality" (Brecht on Theatre 2-3). These words, written shortly after Brecht heard of Wedekind's death, appeared as a eulogy in a newspaper in Augsburg. Brecht was only twenty when he met Wedekind, and he instantly became a devotee of his plays and performances, to the point of imitating Wedekind's poetry, singing, and appearance. Brecht's admiration and adoption of Wedekind's style grew out of his fascination with Wedekind's plays, private

life, and public persona. Brecht's own desires for freedom and rebellion found a voice in Wedekind's notoriety and storied career. Brecht's rational and Marxist views that influenced later playwrights was, ironically, born from the chaotic and personality-driven Wedekind.

Benjamin Franklin Wedekind was born in Hannover, Germany in 1864. He was named after the famous Founding Father because his parents wished to "honor their new homeland," the United States of America (Witter 379). His father, Dr. Friedrich Wedekind, married a German actress half his age, Emilie Kammerer, while they were both living in San Francisco. She had immigrated to America, and he came on a self-imposed exile due to the political and social upheaval of the 1848 revolution. Once they married, however, they moved back to Germany, where Dr. Wedekind gave up his practice and became a political activist. Later, as Germany was becoming politically unstable again, Dr. Wedekind bought a small castle in Switzerland, which his son later called "one of the most lovely spots I have ever seen on this earth" (Wedekind Diary 2). Young Frank was the second of six children; he went to school first in Lenzburg, then grammar school in Aargau, and left home after an argument with his father turned violent.

This argument was not the first. Wedekind and his father clashed over his studies and career plans; he had ambitions as a writer: "Even as a schoolboy, Wedekind began to write poems and sketches, transforming elements of his own experience into theatre" (Boa 12). In 1848, Wedekind was attending the University of Lausanne, which he left to attend the University of Munich. There, he studied law and literature, which also

contributed to his love of writing, but he left these studies to take a job as a publicity agent for the Swiss soup-cube manufacturer, Maggi. (Boa 8). Even during this busy period of study and employment, Wedekind “spent most of his time immersed in his own artistic and personal concerns” (Boa 8). This change of path did not sit well with Wedekind’s father, who had hopes of Wedekind pursuing a career in law. Dr. Wedekind was “strong-willed,” which only increased his disappointment in his son’s failure as a law student (Lewis 1). The struggles about his career escalated to the point where Wedekind actually punched his father. Wedekind does not record this event in the autobiographical note in his diary, written in 1901, thirteen years after the death of his father. One reason for this omission may be that Frank Wedekind ultimately reconciled with his father before his father’s death in 1888 (Boa 13). Despite his break with them, Wedekind held his family in high regard and felt their significance throughout his life; for example, “The diary of 1889 [one year after his father’s death] tells of constant dreams about his father, and of his deep grief” (Boa 13). At the time of their rift, however, Wedekind had to leave his home; this left Wedekind in a bad place financially, which forced him to take various jobs to provide for himself, a strategy that Wedekind employed for the rest of his life.

While he was finishing high school, Wedekind began writing plays and songs that he sang on his guitar. These talents made him a good fit for his jobs as a journalist and secretary for the Herzog Circus. After the circus disbanded, he headed back to Munich where he began writing his best known work, Spring Awakening. This initial playwrighting effort led to his desire to see his plays produced, so he began a stage

career. Despite his efforts, though, Spring Awakening was not produced because it was considered too explicit for the stage and thus not performed until 1906; even then it was heavily censored.

Censorship was simply one of many political battles Wedekind would fight; in fact, his status as a cultural icon hinged on these battles. The first major conflict arose with the opening of his first fully staged play, Lulu (Earth Spirit and Pandora's Box together), in which he played Dr. Schöning. The role was short lived; Wedekind was forced to flee because he was to be arrested for an offense against the dignity of the emperor, due to an article he wrote for an underground satirical journal entitled *Simplicissimus*.

This journal, to which Wedekind was a major contributor, was founded by his publisher, Albert Langen. *Simplicissimus* was founded on the principle of being “committed to new and controversial literary works” (Lewis 3). The journal was constantly under the scrutiny of censors, and led to an event that became known as the “Langen Affair.” Wedekind’s poems “*Meerfahrt*” (“Ocean Voyage”) and “*Im Heiligen Land*” (“In the Holy Land”), which criticized Kaiser Wilhelm II’s visit to Palestine, were both published by Langen in order to help popularize *Simplicissimus*. These poems caused so much outrage that the authorities raided the editorial offices and confiscated not only the poems, but also one of Wedekind’s verse manuscripts. This raid, of course, caused much controversy for the journal, and forced Wedekind to flee to Zurich and then Paris, before finally returning to Germany to face trial. While in Zurich,

Wedekind met August Strindberg; he also met Strindberg's estranged wife, Frieda Uhl, with whom he began an affair and had an illegitimate child.

Upon his return to Munich, Wedekind was put on trial and imprisoned for six months for *Majestätsbeleidigung*, or insulting the Kaiser. As part of the controversy, Frank Wedekind publicly blamed Langen for his arrest because “[he] interpreted the entire affair as a scheme to gain publicity and increase the circulation of the magazine” (Lewis 3). Yet like any good theatrical impresario, Wedekind, like his publisher, was a shameless self-promoter. Being published and in the news was one way to get one's work out and gain some fame. As angry as he might have been at Langen, the episode helped to establish Wedekind as a counter cultural figure; nothing raises awareness of art and artists more than public persecution. Wedekind later dramatized these events in his farce *Oaha*, written in 1908. Wedekind's imprisonment made him a well known martyr of the left; it defined him as an advocate of liberal causes and reinforced his anti-government attitude.

After his time in prison, Wedekind began to gain fame for his cabaret performances in which he sang original songs and recited poetry and plays (his own and others). Frank Wedekind performed under the stage name of Cornelius Mine-Haha (the name comes from the novel *Minehaha* which Wedekind wrote while imprisoned), and his “*pièce de résistance*,” as he described it, “was the recitation by heart of [Henrik Ibsen's] *Ghosts*, including elaborate descriptions of each stage setting, with myself generally acting the part of whichever character happened to play the lead in any given scene” (Wedekind *Diary* 3-4). Wedekind had a deep knowledge of the theatre, and

apparently employed his powers as an actor to enhance his cabaret repertoire and shock his audience with a controversial play.

These cabarets were performed at a place called The Eleven Executioners—title of both the club and the artistic collective that performed there. *Die Elf Scharfrichter* was short lived, only operating from 1901-1903, because it was shut down due to the politically and sexually charged nature of its shows. The Executioners modeled their performances after the racier cabarets in France. As one of the eleven founders and artists that performed there, Wedekind used the space as a platform for his atheistic beliefs by harshly satirizing the Catholic Church. He also saw the cabaret as a performance laboratory for his “explorations of adolescent eroticism” which he saw as the first step towards anarchy (Large 19). Wedekind’s anarchist views are apparent in Pandora’s Box. The title alludes to the destruction of the earth; the main character, Lulu, causes mayhem and destruction by challenging sexual boundaries and opposing woman’s passive role by defying and even murdering her husband.

As part of their anarchic agenda, the Eleven Executioners stood against the *Lex Heinze*, a morality law which allowed the police to interfere in art that was deemed inappropriate. In fact, the Eleven Executioners were founded as a reaction to this law; Peter Jelavich cites the *Lex Heinze*, named after “a pimp and murderer whose trial in 1891 brought to light the sordid conditions of the Berlin underworld” (141), as being the “immediate political cause for the founding of the *Elf Scharfrichter*” (140). Their public protest against this law provided an outlet for Wedekind to express his critique of Wilhelmine morals and government. Wedekind joined with several other dissenters and

paraded through the streets of Munich during the carnival of 1901, “carrying protest placards and singing their battle hymn. It [the hymn] claimed that they were prepared to do anything against the *Lex Heinze* except ‘streak’” (Appignanesi 43). This type of exposure surely drew much attention, for “The Eleven Executioners became a prominent fixture of the Schwabing scene” (Large 17). Even though the cabaret only lasted from 1901 to 1903, it caused a ripple that was felt throughout society; its witty, topical satire attracted a loyal following and appealed to a broad cross section of the public. The Eleven Executioners raised enough money to rent a small theatre, which they decorated with works of art and masks of the eleven. In keeping with their professed job description, they had gathered implements of torture and execution and displayed them throughout the theatre. Wedekind and his comrades wanted to “execute... social hypocrisy itself” and in keeping with that tradition, they chose a “skull wearing a judge’s wig and a pillory” as their emblem (Appignanesi 43-44). On their opening night, April 13, 1901, The Eleven Executioners walked into the theatre dressed in blood-red gowns with slit-eyed cowls, carrying executioners’ hatchets. Arriving on the stage, they recited their theme song in *basso profundo*:

It looms on high that black block,

We judge heartily and pierce.

Blood red heart, blood red frock,

Our fun is always fierce.

Any enemy of the time,

Will meet the executioner’s axe

Any friends of death and crime,

We'll adorn with song and rhyme. (Appignesi 44).

After this initial incantation, the more illicit performances would begin. The Executioners' resident *femme fatale*, Marya Delvard, described as being “an extremely thin woman with flaming red hair, black-rimmed eyes, and luminescent skin” (Large 18), would take the stage. She was known for singing songs that Wedekind had written for her, perhaps the most notable being “Ilse,” a song about awakened passions:

I was a child of fifteen,

A pure, innocent child,

When I first experienced

How sweet the joys of love are.

He took me in an embrace

And laughed

And whispered, “Oh what joy!”

And then gently, gently

He bent my head onto the pillow.

Since that day I love them all,

Life's most beautiful spring is mine.

And when I no longer please anyone,

Gladly will I be buried. (Segel 152)

Ilse's song takes its title from the free-spirited character in Spring Awakening, even using one of her lines from the play: “I love one and all of them” (Wedekind 100).

By recreating Ilse's story in a song, Wedekind was able to see how far he could push the boundaries of sexual representation on stage, especially in regard to Ilse's age at the time of her sexual awakening. Wedekind exploited his own sexuality on stage by reportedly exposing himself; Martha Bayles, in "The Shock-Art Fallacy," describes how Wedekind's transgressive performances even included "one man shows in which he excoriates the government, spews profanity, urinates, masturbates, even goes into convulsions" (18). Such acts would have typically been branded as "lewd" and subsequently censored, but the Eleven Executioners was able to remain open by calling itself a private club, only performing for "guests"—although in each of their shows they told those in attendance how to gain admittance to subsequent performances.

The purpose of this "private" status for a public entertainment was to circumvent censorship of performances that pilloried the conservative Reich. The political and social content of the performances caught the attention of numerous government officials who tried to shut down the cabaret. Eventually, the government forced its way in, taking away the club's private status and reclassifying it as a "vaudeville 'devoid of the higher interest of art and science,' which meant it could be closed down by the police at any time" (Large 19). This new classification allowed for more governmental control—the exact intrusive regulation that the Eleven Executioners were battling against. This lower status put the Executioners on thin ice, and made them rethink how far they could push boundaries in the future. By 1903, such governmental actions caused much dissent within the Executioners, and with the government becoming increasingly conservative, they decided to cease operations.

Wedekind's performances at *The Eleven Executioners* had brought him much needed money along with some fame. His infectious stage persona made Wedekind the popular man he became; Brecht claimed this persona was Wedekind's greatest work (Brecht on Theatre 4). In fact, contemporary scholars Oliver Double and Michael Wilson assert that: "There was no apparent gap between the electrifying performer on the cabaret stage, holding audiences rapt with murderous songs, and the offstage man. Indeed, Wedekind made efforts to maintain his scandalous public image in his everyday life, regularly asking young women if they were still virgins" (53-54). With Wedekind consciously merging his stage presence with his real self, it is no wonder he became notorious, mysterious, and a counter-cultural icon. Wedekind was not an easy man to understand; his experience with jail, poverty, and disappointment (mostly due to his inability to get his plays produced) caused him to be a man of "indomitable and uncompromising power and determination" (Clark 1), traits that contributed to his iconic status; he was abetted by his adoring audiences, whom he often included in his performances, as well as his fellow actors. In general, his cabaret performances were tremendously popular, although public officials denounced them as debased because of their content—which frequently portrayed those same officials as objects of ridicule. Even after the *Eleven Executioners* closed, Frank Wedekind still performed, playing at other cabarets around Munich, building his reputation as a leader of Berlin's counter-culture.

During this period, Wedekind turned his focus to a legitimate stage career. His earlier failures to get Spring Awakening and his Lulu play produced compelled him to

write “a dramaturgically more orthodox kind of masterpiece” (Bentley “Nine Notes” 11); he came up with The Marquis of Keith. It was a flop and Wedekind suffered, considering himself a tormented and misunderstood artist. These feelings came to shape his cabaret act, in which he consciously took on the “misunderstood artist” personality. His “immobile face,” as Brecht described it, combined with his dense, often cryptic poetry, added to his mystery. Eric Bentley describes Wedekind’s persona thusly: “The thought of being misunderstood and unappreciated became the man’s obsession and came to dictate what he would write. And he wrote *about* being misunderstood and unappreciated. He went on stage—to *be* the misunderstood, unappreciated artist” (Bentley “Nine Notes” 11). Yet Wedekind also struggled with this impulse, for on a practical level, he also desired broader acceptance. Bentley goes on to say, “In his anxiety to be better understood (for unlike some modernists he never enjoyed being misunderstood), Wedekind later elected to be less original [when it came to the structure of his plays]” (“Nine Notes” 12). Whether he actually became “less original” or not, it seems that Wedekind found a way to get his works produced. His two Lulu plays were finally produced in 1904 and again in 1905. He originally wrote them as one piece, but decided to split them up and write a few additional acts, allowing him to make significant revisions to his original work. For example, in the original Lulu, Lulu fires two shots at the end of Act III, but in the revised version, Lulu fires five bullets and continues to fire the empty gun. These changes can be credited to his shifting misogynistic views on life, according to Bentley. This change shows Lulu as a more

deranged woman, bent on killing Schöning, whereas in the original version, the killing almost seems to be an accident.

One of the stars in his Lulu plays was Tilly Newes, whom Wedekind married in 1906. Wedekind met Tilly while rehearsing The Marquis of Keith, and worked with her again when Wedekind chose her to play Lulu. Although he was 22 years her senior, he found her to be the sole reason for him to settle down and start a family. Wedekind had spent much of his life searching for the balance between matrimony and his bohemian lifestyle. The following excerpt from his lost diary of 1892 expresses this sentiment:

I'm in search of woman. Glad to find her in any shape whatsoever... I've been exiled from her for the past eight days. She tore me from my solitude, fell upon me, and I went to the devil. I thought I would enjoy the course of instruction, and would return a hero. That won't work. My only hope will be to come back to her in a moral sense. That's when the life or death decision will be taken. (Hay Introduction xvii-xviii)

Wedekind's search for "woman" as a species might seem a desire for anonymous sexual liaisons, but the longing and anxiety in his subsequent words seem to express a yearning for a more intimate connection. Perhaps he was searching for the right woman who would allow him to practice his "liberated" views on free love, yet he seemed to recognize that to accomplish this goal he would have to give up his bachelorhood. The "moral sense" here might be monogamy—not something Wedekind seemed to appreciate in his younger days. This passage was written years before he met Tilly,

although it seems that his views about free love never changed because he found the balance between the bohemian lifestyle he enjoyed and the more conventional family life.

Ultimately, Wedekind chose the path of death from his point of view: “For a writer, a marriage would spell ruin. And if, what’s more, I were to marry for love, come to terms with the world, then I might as well be buried straight away” (Wedekind Diary 11). For Wedekind, it must have taken a special woman to get him to leave his old life and begin a monogamous relationship, especially one in which he would father two children, Pamela and Kadidja. Ironically, all Wedekind’s doubts about marriage were not about his obligations to be monogamous; rather, he worried about Tilly’s faithfulness. Consequently, their marriage was rocky from the start: David F. Kuhns writes that Wedekind was a “jealous husband whose fear of being cuckolded and whose neurotic lack of self-confidence...haunted him to the end of his life” (55). Like the husband characters in Lulu, Wedekind was distrustful of Tilly, and felt threatened by other men. One story claims that if any man tried to help Tilly on with her coat, Wedekind would snatch the coat from his hands and tell him that such a privilege was reserved for him (Trussler 63). Even with all his mistrust of Tilly, Wedekind apparently did not try to evoke her suspicions about his own fidelity. His biographers claim that Wedekind remained faithful to Tilly until his death.

Wedekind’s surprising, untimely death was apparently caused by a bout of appendicitis that was never fully cured. He developed the condition in 1914, and had an operation to cure it. The operation was difficult, as were most operations at that time,

and he suffered a rupture that developed into an infection. Wedekind wrote, “My rupture is giving me trouble” on February 23, 1918 (Diary 249), just a few days before his death. His diary reveals nothing else that would indicate an awareness of impending death; yet Wedekind might have sensed that he did not have long to live, for the last thing he wrote was a poem to Tilly, something that he had not done at any previous point in his diary. Also of note is that this portion of Wedekind’s diary was not published in his lifetime, nor was it meant for publication; it is part of the collection referred to as his “pocket diary,” written for “purely private reference” (Hay Introduction xv). Even though Wedekind created a countercultural persona which he put on display as his true character, it seems that, once he was married, he desired the conventional stability and privacy provided by a home and family.

Wedekind’s funeral was attended by hundreds of mourners, so many, in fact, that the church was reportedly overflowing with young men and women—but not just youth: peoples from all walks of life— artists, intellectuals, members of the bourgeoisie— were in attendance. Eric Bentley reports, “His [Wedekind’s] funeral in Munich (reported by Brecht and others) was almost taken over by a crowd of prostitutes, his devoted fans” (Bentley “Nine Notes” 3). His followers—ranging from the fanatical Heinrich Lautensak, “who in a fit of madness at his [Wedekind’s] funeral, according to Franz Blei, wanted to throw himself into his open grave ‘screaming after his master’”—to the now famous Bertolt Brecht, increased Wedekind’s fame by honoring him and his work long after his death (Segel 159). In fact, the young Bertolt Brecht was so moved by the death of Wedekind that he immediately went and shaved his head to more closely

resemble his idol. Wedekind's life was full of contradictions: he described himself as misunderstood, but he wanted everyone to understand that; he wanted to have sex freely yet he is monogamous once he gets married. These contradictions serve to show the chaos in Wedekind's life that helped establish him as a counter-cultural figure. Brecht later used these paradoxes of Wedekind's life to create his walking contradiction: Baal.

Chapter 2: Legendary; Or, Wedekind: the Man, the Myth, the Counter-Cultural Figure

Under constant scrutiny by the right and glamorized by the left, Wedekind could not help but appeal to a rebellious younger generation. Here was a man with no inhibitions, critical of middle class values, and willing to push moral, political, and social boundaries. Tilly Wedekind writes in her memoir that when she told him that she loved him despite his work, Wedekind replied that the two could not be separated. Earlier in his career, his lack of inhibitions pushed aside his private life. He explored and exhibited his own feelings through his published writings. In fact, the clearest glimpse into Wedekind's thoughts is through his diaries, many of which were either published or prepared for publication during his lifetime. Wedekind's diaries show the *bon vivant* that was in the public's eye; there is no disconnect between the public and the private Wedekind—they are one and the same. Conversely, Wedekind often cultivated an air of mystery by seeming to withdraw into a private world in front of spectators. Heinrich Mann wrote of Wedekind's capacity for being private in public—for his audacious lack of concern for pleasing an audience or even playing to it:

Thick-set, sharply cut head with the profile of Caesar, forehead promising mischief set off by close cropped hair. But the eyes, which darted with a tinge of malice were somehow strange. They also flashed with irritation and immediately afterward fell silent, full of melancholy...Strumming as if annoyed, then the performance. Nasal, sharp, ringing. In pregnant pauses the singer turned and twisted in response to his own private motives. He took only himself seriously and almost entirely forgot his public...He opposed the idea of a politely brought up epoch. (Segel 159)

Wedekind seemed entranced while on stage, apparently aware of little else around him. His uninhibited performances can be attributed to this lack of self-consciousness; ironically, this aloofness and freedom from concern about the audiences' feelings mesmerized his spectators and only increased his appeal.

Wedekind used his cabaret performances as a way to make money so that he could pursue his desire to get his plays produced. Though he appeared not to care about pleasing an audience, he often tried out scenes or speeches from his plays on the cabaret stage in order to gauge the reactions they would elicit. Depending on the response, Wedekind changed the piece and then performed it again until he got just the precise reaction he desired.

Much of Wedekind's source material for his performances came from his life experience, so it is no wonder then that Wedekind's published personal life was just as explicit as his cabaret identity:

After recovering from a thoroughgoing hangover...I go to lunch, and subsequently in search of a twelve-year old child. After wandering around for ages I find one on the Boulevard Rochechouart, but unfortunately she is eighteen. I take her to a hotel and do her barely satisfactory justice for 10 francs, although I quite fancy her, and she is very nice to me. I'm utterly shattered, however. After the first feeble attempt I'm bathed in perspiration. I'm not worried, however, and pump as much beer into myself as I can before staggering off home. (Wedekind Diary 127)

In comparing this portion of his diary to the description of Wedekind's cabaret performance, it is apparent that the man made little attempt to hide his true self. In fact, he seems eager to scandalize his reader through an explicit account of his private life. By scandalizing his audience, Wedekind is connecting his private life to his public performances.

Just as in his private life, Wedekind used every available part of himself to create his cabaret persona, especially his charismatic and penetrating eyes. His eyes became the vehicle through which he expressed himself on stage; they expressed the mood of his performance (from malice to irritation to melancholy), and they also selected women with whom he could have relations. Wedekind's audacity often shocked his audience, but he opposed the "idea of a politely brought up epoch," mocking manners and politeness as a sham of the bourgeoisie. He was a self-indulgent man concerned largely with his own gratification. Wedekind also had a temper— as shown in the fights with

his father—that sometimes alienated him from friends and family. Ultimately, his hedonistic lifestyle and remarkable artistry made Wedekind popular as a counter-cultural figure, but his refusal to compromise made it nearly impossible for him to broaden his appeal. Paradoxically, he needed the approval of his audience to get his plays published and performed, although he did not want to care about whether his audience liked his work. Despite his contrarian views—perhaps because of them—he gained enough fame and followers to attain critical success and counter cultural status.

Chapter 3: A Meeting for the Ages, Or Do a Little Dance, Make a Little Love

From revolutionizing the stage to influencing modern filmmaking, Brecht permeates contemporary performance. Epic theatre existed before Brecht, but it was he who unified all its elements into a single style, and posited that “the point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason” (Brecht on Theatre 23). Reason and emotion have conflicted on the stage since Greek Tragedy’s alternation between rational *stichomythia* and emotional catharsis; yet where and how did Brecht develop the notion that theatre should appeal more to the one’s reason than to one’s feelings? It arises, in part, from the political climate of the Weimar Republic. The time in which Brecht began creating theatre was a turbulent one. As the young playwright came of age, a new movement began in the theatre that rejected the subjectivity and emotionalism of expressionism. The Great War and its aftermath gave rise to new types of entertainment and art—most notably topical entertainments inspired, in part, by existing genres like cabaret. Cabaret performers often sang or performed sketches about issues to raise questions about society, politics, ethics or art.

Cabaret performances would be a primary influence on Brecht's evolving ideas about epic theatre, and the primary cabaret performer who shaped Brecht's approach was Frank Wedekind.

Brecht was introduced to the works of Wedekind early in his life, and in 1912, his father gave him the Georg Müller edition of the complete works of Wedekind. Brecht read the edition "from cover to cover, and the state of his copy by 1918 was nothing if not well-thumbed" (Münsterer 23). Brecht did not just read the works of Wedekind once or even twice, for that matter; he read and reread them. He made notes in the margins and studied the words carefully, absorbing Wedekind's ideas and style. Brecht was not emphatic about just reading Wedekind, he also composed music to some of Wedekind's writings, most notably "*Der blinde Knabe*" (The Blind Lad), which he later performed, along with his own compositions.

Brecht often attended seminars held by Professor Artur Kutscher, a theatre historian and well-known biographer of Frank Wedekind. Kutscher taught at the University of Munich, where many aspiring writers and theatre artists went to his lectures. Brecht, however, was known for not attending lectures; there is even a story about how Brecht would sign up for numerous classes, wait for his father to pay for them, and then withdraw from them in order to pocket the money. Yet Brecht regularly attended Kutscher's seminars, presumably because of Kutscher's enviable friendship with Wedekind. Kutscher's primary work is *Frank Wedekind: Sein Leben und seine Werke* (Frank Wedekind: His Life and Works), a three volume work that has never been

translated into English, which might explain, in part, Wedekind's lack of recognition in the English speaking world.

Physical/Performance Similarities

For all of his excitement about Frank Wedekind, Brecht only met Wedekind once, although he got to see several of his performances. Their one "meeting" was completely finagled by Brecht. He arrived early to one of Wedekind's cabaret performances and after watching Wedekind pacing between the seats he "stepped out, probably on purpose, into the path of the oncoming Wedekind—who promptly ran straight into him. 'I do beg your pardon,' he [Wedekind] said raising his hat, and steamed on" (Double and Wilson 51). This is the story according to Brecht, and it took just this brief interchange to change the course of Brecht's life forever. Other than this episode, there is no other record of Brecht actually meeting Wedekind. He did attend an end-of-year function hosted by Artur Kutscher where Wedekind was the guest of honor, but there is no indication that the two ever conversed.

Brecht spent much of his time trying to emulate Wedekind. He often wrote praises of Wedekind, even saying: "One shouldn't overlook the fact that it's not the play but the performance that is the real purpose of all one's efforts" (Brecht Dialogues 74). Brecht was entranced by Wedekind's persona, and this praise comes from Brecht's eulogy of Wedekind, in which he says that Wedekind's "greatest work was his personality" (Brecht "Expression of Faith"). Indeed, Brecht's writing on Wedekind focused more on his performance than his plays (Double and Wilson 52). Wedekind may have gotten only a few of his plays produced, but he was certainly known far and wide

for his persona and for putting on quite the show. Brecht, too, strove to cultivate a Wedekind-like magnetism; indeed, like his idol, he performed in the cabarets and played the guitar, even producing reactions similar to the ones that Wedekind provoked. Brecht's cabaret performances were described as, "An irresistible force...He didn't sing well but with infectious passion, drunk on his own verse, ideas, and images as other people are on wine, and intoxicating his listeners as only a youth can" (Double and Wilson 51). This description sounds remarkably like the ones that followed Wedekind wherever he performed. Brecht also used this charisma for similar ends: "Brecht's singing could certainly make an impression. His schoolmate and fellow medical student Otto Muellereisert said Brecht's singing got him 'ninety per cent of his women'" (Double and Wilson 51).

Womanizing seemed to be Wedekind's and Brecht's peculiar talent. They adored women, and often recounted their romantic experience in their published and unpublished writings. Wedekind's relationships inspired him to create bohemian characters like Ilse from Spring Awakening and Lulu from Earth Spirit and Pandora's Box. Celebrating their sexual freedom, Wedekind portrayed these characters as carefree and joyous, even though their sexual adventures were sometimes risky or dangerous. For Brecht, however, it was a different story: not all of his sexual romps were positive and he often needed help from his friends. One of his early relationships was with a young woman named Paula Banholzer; with "Bi," as he called her, Brecht wound up fathering an illegitimate son, whom he named Frank in honor of his idol. Both Brecht and Wedekind fathered illegitimate children; the outcomes of these exploits, however,

varied greatly. Frida Uhl and Wedekind parted ways, and Uhl sent the child to live with her parents. Brecht, on the other hand, fell in love with Bi, and maintained contact with her for many years; according to Bi, Brecht loved his son Frank, even though he seldom saw him. Yet Brecht was a man known for having multiple women at the same time. He could often be found writing letters to his lovers, and finding ways of convincing each of them that they were the only one that mattered to him. It is these numerous sexual partners that often got Brecht in trouble and had him reaching out for his friends' help. When he was not wooing women with his guitar, Brecht often found himself joining friends, usually under much happier circumstances, for gatherings where they would sing "songs that Brecht had composed and that he accompanied on the guitar in the manner of the balladeer, actor, and dramatist Frank Wedekind" (Mews 3). Both men were apparently entrancing; Brecht mesmerized the audience and, like Wedekind, became entranced himself during his performances. Both also seemed to have similar abilities when it came to music, playing original works and setting their own poems to music. Brecht learned from Wedekind that "given aplomb, vitality, and a guitar, you do not need a trained voice or a well-shaped face to make yourself diabolically attractive and exciting to an audience" (Hayman 27). Like Wedekind, Brecht used all available means in order to attract and excite his audience. He modeled himself after Wedekind, taking up the guitar, and trying to emulate Wedekind's personality.

Brecht played the guitar and composed his own tunes, but he often played the songs of Wedekind. Enthralled with the *Bänkelsänger's* style and subject matter, Brecht modeled his song, "*Apfelbök*," on Wedekind's "*Der Tantenmörder*" ("The Aunt-

Killer”); both songs tell the story of men who kill members of their family. Brecht was not known for having the same vocal quality as his idol; however, his voice and charisma still enabled him to get a gig at Hesterberg’s *Wilde Bühne*: “When he arrived at her [Hesterberg’s] flat for his audition, she was not overwhelmed by her first sight of him....However, when he started to sing, she was entranced” (Double and Wilder 50). The cabaret was not Brecht’s final destination; he, like Wedekind, performed cabaret principally to make money. The cabaret would influence many of his ideas when it came to the creation of epic theatre, **but** he performed largely as a means to support himself while he was writing. Unlike Wedekind, Brecht was more intent on getting his plays produced. His willingness to compromise and work within the system is what made him a more frequently produced and commercially successful playwright. Wedekind did slowly fade into some obscurity, especially in the United States, but with the movie *Pandora’s Box* and the recent Broadway production of the *Spring Awakening: The Musical* there has been resurgence in producing Wedekind’s work.

The cabaret is not the only job that Brecht shared with Wedekind. Brecht often worked for newspapers; he wrote poems that were published in the student newspaper, *Die Ernte* (The Harvest), at the Augsburg *Realgymnasium*. He also wrote theatre reviews for the Augsburg city papers. This is the same newspaper in which his first one-act play, *Die Bibel* (The Bible), was published. Like Wedekind, he even got in trouble for some of these writings: he was almost expelled for an “essay that criticized the Horatian dictum ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’ (It is sweet and proper to die for the fatherland)” (Mews 3). Brecht was well on his path to joining Wedekind as a man

who would get in political and legal troubles for his writings. Whereas Wedekind's work landed him in jail, Brecht's plays and poetry –most notably “Ballad [Legend] of the Dead Soldier”—got him put on the Nazi's blacklist and ultimately forced his exile in 1933.

Perhaps the event that made the biggest impact on Brecht was Wedekind's funeral. In his description, Brecht has nothing positive to say about the service itself. Hans Otto Münsterer describes it this way: “[It was] by all accounts, an embarrassing, botched affair” (158). It was not long after the funeral that Brecht changed his entire look to more closely resemble that of Frank Wedekind. One account, given by a fellow student named Michael Siegel, says: “He wore his hair close-cropped and had shaved the hairline in a band about an inch wide across his brow. The fast growing stubble was often visible and seemed somehow to accent his hard ascetic image¹“(Münsterer 159). His new look was a whole new level of devotion; he even began to wear the same style of clothing. Not only was Brecht studying Wedekind, he was trying to recreate himself in Wedekind's image. Later in his life, Brecht even toyed with the idea of a revival of Spring Awakening because of the “impression it made on us all those years ago” (Münsterer 23). The impression created on Brecht seems to have been deeply ingrained. When Brecht wrote Baal, his nostalgia for Wedekind and his admiration of Wedekind's anarchic themes permeated the play. Though Brecht's style would later become epic, Baal has a unique Wedekindian flair, especially the main character.

¹ See Appendix A for a pictorial comparison of Wedekind and Brecht

Wedekind's Sociopolitical and Theatrical Ideas

Wedekind began his dramatic writing in the 1890's—after naturalism had peaked, yet before the expressionist movement got underway. Wedekind's harsh social criticism and his use of grotesque characterization cause some scholars to categorize him as a "proto-expressionist." His works prefigure the generational conflicts and critiques of bourgeois values that marked the plays of Reinhard Sorge, Walter Hasenclever, Georg Kaiser, and Ernst Toller. Another proto-expressionist element is Wedekind's use of distortion: characters or settings seem exaggerated, weird, or out of sync with other elements. Most of the adults in Spring Awakening, for example, appear grotesque and even monstrous; their ugliness and cruelty are outward signs of their corruption. For Wedekind, the suppression of natural drives caused neurosis and perpetuated ignorance. He characterizes *Kleinbürgertum* as a façade and humankind as "...animals duped by a hypocritical society into concealing our natural instincts" (*NYT* 6 May 2001). On the one hand, concealment encourages denial and ignorance; on the other, it leads to obsession and an explosive build up of repressed feelings. In either case, self-suppression of natural urges leads to self-destruction, especially in Wedekind's two most successful works: *Spring Awakening* and the *Lulu* plays. Sex, what Wedekind considered part of "our natural instincts," plays a prominent role in both of these plays. In *Spring Awakening*, the three main characters—Melchior, Wendla, and Moritz—are adolescents searching for answers about sex: what it is, why it is alluring, and why it is so ingrained in the human psyche. Sex complicates these character's lives and ultimately precipitates their downfall—Wendla dies from a botched abortion; Moritz

commits suicide due to societal pressures over school and sex; and Melchior is expelled from his *Gymnasium* and sent away to a reformatory because he shares the facts of life with Moritz and gets a girl pregnant. In Earth Spirit and Pandora's Box, sex enables Lulu to climb the social ladder, yet it also causes her fall from grace; she must resort to prostitution to sustain herself. For Wedekind, sex in itself is natural and enjoyable; middle class morality, however, makes it seem shameful, leading to guilt, repression, punishment, and violence.

In his own life, Wedekind flouted sexual morés, recording his many “conquests” in his diary. A close examination of Wedekind’s diary reveals that he often sought out women he could sleep with (a trait that Brecht would also adopt, only with more success). Many of the entries, especially before his marriage to Tilly in 1906, contain his interactions with women that day. Two entries from his time in Paris reveal his preoccupation with sexual conquest:

It would seem that I’ve fallen in love with the fat little blonde dancer at the Moulin Rouge. I’ve been dreaming of her all week. At the very thought of her I can’t help sticking my tongue out...I’m just at the point of leaving the hall when I spot the fat little dancer rehearsing her *pas*. But I’m not shaved, I’m wearing trousers with frayed turn-ups, and – as far as I’m concerned, the most ominous factor –I’m still somewhat weary from last night. 19 June 1892.

(Wedekind *Diary* 136)

Wedekind's focus on sexual gratification shows in his concern about his appearance, a vital part of his strategy for attracting women, and in his worries about exhaustion hampering his ability to perform. Affection and emotional intimacy seem absent; for example, he does not bother to get this dancer's name—he just calls her the “fat little blonde dancer.” He does, however, pay close attention to other details that he is able to recall with precision:

I wait in vain until almost twelve 'o clock for the fat little blonde dancer. Shortly before closing time a nice young creature in a kind of seaside resort costume whom I've watched dancing all evening with tolerable enjoyment comes up and asks me for a small favour. Blue eyes in a little blond head, seventeen years old at the most, with very voluptuous lips. She reminds me of someone, but I can't think who. She still has on her neck the bruises that testify to yesterday's love-making. (20 June 1892) (Wedekind *Diary* 136)

Here again, Wedekind does not provide a name—he seems to have trouble remembering names or perhaps he prefers she remain anonymous, especially since his diaries were published during his lifetime. He is able, however, to recall the color of her eyes, her approximate age, her lips, and her bruises. Wedekind seems to remember the details that pique his sexual interest in the girl. Lips, which have an obvious sexual connotation, and the bruises show the intense passion of a previous tryst. Such erotic but impersonal encounters informed Wedekind's writing, particularly the *Lulu* plays, with their frank depiction of sex. Gossipy and titillating diary entries like “He had succeeded in teaching

her cunnilingus, so that at least he didn't have to look at her face" (21 June 1892) (Wedekind *Diary* 137) reveal not just a misogynistic aversion to women who did not match his perception of beauty, but also a definite preference for sex with an undesirable woman rather than no sex at all. Clearly, at this stage of his life, performance was all that mattered.

Wedekind's views on politics and society were as free as his views on sex. Wedekind partly blamed politics for the suppression of sexual urges, thus he had his problems with the government and body politic. After his time in jail, however, Wedekind never seemed to push the boundaries as far as he had before that time. He often violated the standards of public decency and crossed political boundaries; once the government started to push back, however, he smartly stepped down, and found subtler ways to incense the party in power. Consequently, when the government threatened the Eleven Executioners, Wedekind did not counterattack as he had been apt to do during his time working for *Simplicissimus*: "With the authorities' ax hanging over their heads, the Executioners became more careful in their selection of targets and less violent in their theatrical techniques" (Large 19). For example, when the censors came down on their performance of *The Good Family*, a puppet show that criticized Wilhelm II's "unrealistic, political aspirations and his statement that Germany's future lay 'on the water'" (Appignanesi 46), they quit performing it. As the censors became stricter, the Executioners tried, to little avail, to hide their identities through the use of "blood-curdling" stage names and robes which made them appear as foreboding executioners,

which is wonderfully captured in a painting entitled “*The Dance of the Eleven Executioners*” (Appendix A).

Wedekind came from a line of political activists; his father came to America due to a suppression of the political revolts in the 1860’s, then moved to Switzerland as a form of self-imposed exile because he disagreed with the unification of Germany under Prussia. Due to his father’s involvement with political activism, it is not surprising that Wedekind also developed an interest in politics and protests. He was more inclined, however, to rally against conservative theatrical traditions and restrictive social norms than to fight the government because he “could see in the fate of his father the futility of political criticism and the impossibility of political change within Germany” (Jelavich 75-76). His father’s example might explain why Wedekind criticized Wilhelmine social morés rather than turning his attention towards political entities. Another reason for the focus on societal pressures rather than governmental policy is that Wedekind was arrested and incarcerated for six months in 1900. There is no record of his keeping a diary while he was in jail; the only insights into Wedekind’s thoughts during his time in prison is his novel Mine-Haha, a work chiefly concerned with the reasons he was thrown into prison rather than his experiences while there. This period obviously had a major impact on Wedekind’s life, because after his release, he never quite challenged authority the way he did before his imprisonment. Wedekind decided to call it quits rather than stand up to authority; ultimately, he redirected his criticism, thinking perhaps that the best way to change the government was by changing those who put political entities into

power: the body politic. Wedekind wrote the following note in Heinrich Heine's On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany:

We are not fighting for the civil rights of the people, but rather for the divine rights of man. In this and other respects we distinguish ourselves from the heroes of the Revolution. We do not want sans-culottes, frugal citizens, and incorruptible presidents. We are establishing a democracy of equally splendid, equally holy, equally blissful gods. You demand abstinent mores, simple dress, unspiced pleasures. On the contrary, we demand nectar and ambrosia, purple cloaks, expensive perfumes, voluptuousness, and splendor, the laughing dance of nymphs, music, and comedies. (Jelavich 78)

In other words, Wedekind's protest was not directed toward the government; he calls instead for a social revolution—of amorality—that would do away with middle-class values in favor of freedom and bodily pleasures.

The breaking free from sexual repression became his rallying cry and permeated his plays. Wedekind sought to influence his audiences by showing them the negative side to sexual repression—ignorance and danger. In Spring Awakening, the adolescents' ignorance about the facts of life leads to ruin and death. Wedekind advocates for the liberation of all types of sexual activity, from masturbation to homosexuality. Of course, all of these ideals went against what his era deemed proper, and thus Wedekind became more of a counter-cultural figure: someone who goes against the grain and represents opposition to prevailing attitudes.

Wedekind became the voice of the left, and sought to use his position as a cultural icon to set into motion ideas that would lead to reform. Perhaps the best evidence of his influence was not something that occurred during his lifetime— rather, it was at his funeral, when “a mob of the young and the strange and the crazy—members of a cultural and sexual bohemia that had recognized in Wedekind a freak with the courage of his freakdom—and these mourners stormed across the graveyard, rushing for good places beside the open grave” (Franzen ix). Wedekind’s sudden and untimely death galvanized his youthful fans. Most of his adherents were denizens of the bohemian Schwabing district of Munich; more important, many were established or—like Brecht—aspiring writers who adopted Wedekind’s ideas and exerted enormous influence on art and culture during the Weimar years.

Wedekind’s performances in cabaret and the theatre ensured he was read and discussed among students, artists, and intellectuals. The cabaret, especially, became a formidable force in Wedekind’s life and appears as an important influence in the early works of Brecht. Scholars of the cabaret described the genre’s development in three stages: pre-War, inter-War, and post-War. Since neither Wedekind nor Brecht had any real part in post-War cabaret, the two most important stages for these men are pre-War and inter-War. Pre-War cabaret is best characterized by irony: “The ironical mode was characteristic of the European cabaret, whose history seems to reflect the Blokian evolution from provoking smile to blasphemous rebellion” (Senelick xi). This form of cabaret was heavily censored due to graphic content and its parodies of society, government, religion, and politics. Due to this strict censorship, “Cabaret remained a

peripheral means of expression, usually limited to its bohemian sphere of influence” (Senelick xi). It is this cabaret, playing to the fringes of society, that Wedekind witnesses while in Paris, and which influences his performances when he goes to Munich and co-founds *Die Elf Scharfrichter*.

Munich was the logical place for German cabaret as it became “something of a Paris of the German-speaking world” and with “an illegitimate birthrate of one in three, the city Brecht found was a volatile mixture of the archest nationalist conservatism and cosmopolitan bohemianism” (Fuegi 28). Munich’s extreme contrast and conflict in ideologies encouraged sharp satiric and polemical wit. Munich’s likeness to Paris comes about because German artists like Wedekind learned the art of cabaret in Paris and brought it with them when they came to Munich.

Inter-War cabaret experienced greater freedom, but was still under heavy scrutiny. While World War I was raging, the cabaret became characterized by “Dadaistic anarchy”; however, after the war this genre began to fall out of favor, in light of the desire to see more realistic and relevant events portrayed on the stage (Senelick xii). This stage of cabaret became important for Wedekind and Brecht because it encouraged the social and political satire that informed their works.

The cabaret’s main focus was entertainment, according to Senelick, and his description of the “ideal type” cabaret emphasizes its variety, intimacy, and topical subjects:

It consisted of a small stage in a relatively small hall, where the audience sat around tables. The intimacy of the setting allowed

direct, eye-to-eye contact between the performers and spectators. The show consisted of short (five- or ten-minute) numbers from several different genres, usually songs, comic monologues, dialogues and skits, less frequently dances, pantomimes, puppet shows, or even short films. They dealt in a satirical or parodistic manner with topical issues: sex (most of all), commercial fashions, cultural fads, politics (least of all). (Jelavich Berlin Cabaret 2)

Even though political issues were seldom treated, the government was nevertheless sensitive to any implied criticism or violations of standards, as Wedekind's struggles with the authorities indicate. Yet, cabaret's primary focus on entertainment appealed to Wedekind, because he considered himself an entertainer first and foremost. As a man who got his start in the circus, he was exposed to various forms of popular diversions which no doubt made an impact on him. He wrote an essay, entitled "*Zirkusgedanken*" asserting the importance of the circus as a cultural and popular entertainment. He admired, for example, its intimate connection to the audience and its appeal to all classes. The small setting of cabaret was also intimate and seemed perfect for Wedekind to test his new material; it allowed him to gauge the audience's reactions because he was able to see his spectators' expressions. Wedekind did not report on any of his *Elf Scharfrichter* performances in his diary. He writes explicit details about his experience in other cabarets, but these mostly focus on his attempted or successful sexual encounters. The cabaret for Wedekind, it seems, was also a place where he could gratify his sexual appetite. For Brecht, however, the cabaret became an expression of his own

youthful rebellion and a new kind of theatre that combined the poetry, music, and satire that he shaped to suit his particular style.

Brecht attended the cabarets in Munich, where he first saw Wedekind perform. According to John Fuegi in, Brecht and Company, the young playwright was an enthusiastic audience member: “Brecht loved this kind of humor [humor which attacked conventions], not only writing such things himself but all his life being a marvelous audience for it, bellowing with laughter till his sides ached” (29). This description of Brecht, along with his awkward, arranged “meeting” with Wedekind, characterizes his desire to be a part of that world and his deep appreciation for the art. Perhaps this is the very reason why Brecht decided to become a cabaret performer himself; he had a firm knowledge of it, and an experienced role model in Wedekind.

For Brecht, like Wedekind, the cabaret became a welcome source of income and a laboratory for new material. Brecht’s involvement in the cabaret was rather limited prior to 1919; previously, he had played in some small public houses and at gatherings of his friends. After 1919, though, he became more involved in cabaret, both as a performer and an audience member; after 1922, however, there is no record of his performing in the cabaret again. One reason might have been his growing popularity: Drums in the Night, although written a few years before, got its first production that year—also winning Brecht the *Kleist Prize*— and Brecht’s career skyrocketed. One review described his impact, claiming: “The twenty-four-year old writer Bert Brecht has changed the face of German writing overnight” (Meech 53). After this success, Brecht

became much more involved in legitimate theatre, for he begins to get more of his plays produced and also works as a dramaturg, which probably left little time for the cabaret.

Lisa Appignanesi compares Brecht's cabaret performance to Wedekind's and claims their collective efforts as "the mark of the German cabaret song style" (49). She describes Wedekind as "plastic, drastic, and above all diabolic...His harshly ironic, satanic tone, brittle and abrasive was one Bertolt Brecht imitated" (Appignanesi 49). The following description, by Ernst Ritter von Possart, concerning one of Brecht's performances while he was in Augsburg shows that Brecht could indeed captivate the audience in the same manner as Wedekind: "...with his goading rasp of a voice and his peculiar rhythms, a hush fell over the bar—until everyone stood in awed silence listening to him sing. When he finished there were howls of applause, someone spontaneously passed round a hat for the singer, everyone crowded in on him, and he had to begin again" (Münsterer 125). Brecht not only could captivate the audience, but he began to have the same silencing ability that he attributed to Wedekind in his eulogy: "Whether he entered a hall filled with hundreds of screaming students, or a room, or whether he stepped onto a stage—in his peculiar way, i.e., with his sharply cut, iron skull slightly lowered and extended—somewhat clumsy and tense—everybody was silent" (Brecht "Expression" 26). Indeed, for Brecht, Wedekind was "his closest model of what a poet-playwright-performer could be" (Fuegi 38). John Fuegi even claims that the obituary written by Brecht for Wedekind was "as much a portrait of Brecht as it was of the dead singer" (38). In a sense, Brecht saw himself as Wedekind's real heir, taking up the torch of "one of the great educators of Europe." Part of his educational mission,

apparently, was to hasten the end of expressionism by exposing what he considered its self-pitying emotionalism and phony idealism. He boasted, for example, that he could write a better play than his fellow playwright Hanns Johst who had written a surprisingly popular work, *Der Einsame* (The Loner), in 1918. Brecht would justify this claim by writing his first full length play, Baal.

Chapter 4: Baal, Or a Play About Frank Wedekind

Baal was written in 1918, the same year as Wedekind's death; it was not produced, however, until 1920. Baal went through two major rewrites, although the central story stayed the same. The play begins with a prologue, "The Chorale of the Great Baal," which serves to introduce the audience to the central character of the play, Baal, and set him up as a mythical entity:

As Baal grew within his mother's womb so white

Even then the sky was vast and calm and light

Naked, young and hugely marvelous

As Baal loved it when Baal came to us. (Brecht Baal 3)

Baal is larger than life, seeming to have existed as long ago as time itself. The first scene shows Baal as a guest of honor at a dinner party, where he is eating and drinking. The dinner party is hosted by members of the bourgeoisie who have invited Baal to perform. They all praise Baal for his exquisite poems, although he pays no heed to their talking, except to make a disparaging remark here and there. Even as Baal mocks his hosts, they lionize him as the latest trend, failing to sense his irony. The scene shifts to Baal's Garrett, where the audience is introduced to the young Johannes, Baal's friend,

who is having an intense conversation with Baal that quickly turns to the subject of sex. Johannes, as representative of the bourgeoisie, views sex as filthy: “Now I see: You agree that sexual intercourse is dirty,” but Baal quickly corrects him—”That’s the cry of the swine who are no good at it” (Brecht Baal 10)—establishing their relationship as something close to that of Melchior and Moritz, who have a similar discussion of sex in Spring Awakening. The main difference between the two conversations, though, is that Baal and Johannes are in competition. Baal describes all the wonderful aspects of sex: “When you clasp those virgin hips, in the fear and ecstasy of a created being, you will become God...so the two of you in the one bed have many limbs, and your hearts beat in your breasts and the blood flows in your veins” (Brecht Early Plays 27). Yet when Johannes asks, “So you think I should go ahead, if it’s so beautiful?” Baal replies: “I think *you* should steer clear, my dear Johannes” (Brecht Early Plays 28). This exchange is at once intimate and hostile because of Baal’s competitive nature when it comes to women. Baal has eliminated Johannes as a competitor for women, and in doing so, has given himself an opportunity to pursue Johanna, Johannes’ fiancée, for sexual conquest. For Melchior and Moritz, the competitive aspect is not present. Melchior, much like Baal, views sex as a natural human need and tries to help Moritz understand it. Like Johannes, Moritz who cannot feel comfortable about pre-marital sex because of the suppression of his natural urges due to his bourgeois upbringing.

In the tavern, Baal is in his natural element. He is telling stories and playing songs on his guitar. The audience is given its first glimpse of the man that has no cares and rebels against everything. Baal, who has gone into a near-total trance, does not

respond to his friend's requests to stop playing; he only responds to the Teamsters who continue to cheer for him. The scene ends with Baal upsetting Emily, his girl for the night, by chasing after the bar maid. Yet, Baal goes to Emily and "*Throws himself heavily on top of her and kisses her*" (Brecht Baal 16). Back in Baal's Garrett, it is discovered that Baal has slept with Johanna. This scene also reveals Baal's sexual conquest of the sisters with whom he has had previous relations. These two sisters, after fighting about who has to sleep with Baal first, tell him that Johanna has thrown herself into the river. The text does not explicitly state why Johanna kills herself, but the presumption is that she feels too much guilt over betraying Johannes and losing her virginity to Baal, who does not even love her. This event has also led Johannes to become an alcoholic, and he stumbles in, drunk and in despair. Baal has effectively ruined the lives of two friends/members of the bourgeoisie through his sexual escapades. This scene contains the Wedekind-like line: "Are you a virgin?" directed at Sophie, a girl Baal has picked up on the street (Brecht Baal 23).

In the next scene, Baal attacks the religious establishment, calling himself "evil," and sarcastically uttering: "Maybe I'll turn Catholic" (Brecht Baal 24). Back with Sophie, Baal ponders nature, and asks: "Why can't a man sleep with plants?" characterizing nature itself as sexual—and a sexual urge on his part that desires union with nature. From this point on in the play, Baal keeps trying—through sex or drink—to find an altered state; he is either already drunk, or is drinking in almost every scene, especially the tavern scenes. In the café "Night Cloud," Baal nearly incites a riot when he refuses to play and escapes through a bathroom window, running off into the woods,

isolating himself. The first characterization of Baal as a character “all alone in the world” (Brecht Baal 33) comes from the woodcutters who have a recurring role in the final scene. Baal then meets Ekart again, and begins to travel with him. Soon they meet Sophie, who still has intense feelings for Baal, although he never reciprocates her love. Rather, Baal is infatuated with Ekart, telling him, “I love you” and “I don’t care for women anymore...” (Brecht Baal 45). Having ruined all his women, Baal now preys on his friend, intent on transgressing even his own boundaries. In fact, Baal is pushing the boundaries of free love further than Wedekind. There is no definitive evidence that Wedekind had homosexual tendencies, but Wedekind does portray homosexuality between two sympathetic characters, Hänschen Rilow and Ernst Röbel, who share a homoerotic kiss in Spring Awakening. In Baal, the scene begins serenely, as Ekart, Johannes, and Watzmann have a conversation which includes much of the exposition about what happened to Johanna’s body—”She’s still drifting. Nobody ever found her” (Brecht Baal 52). Brecht has given a dark, nihilistic tone to the death of Johanna: like Moritz, she is doomed to travel forever, the difference being that she killed herself for doing the deed rather than just feeling to bourgeois guilt associated with sexual urges. Watzmann reports that Baal’s mother has died, an odd moment, since Baal seems so completely disconnected from his family and is presented in song as some immortal, god-like character. Yet Baal is far from god-like in the final few scenes. Ekart plans to leave Baal because of his excesses. Ultimately, Baal’s jealousy and Ekart’s threat of leaving is what leads Baal to kill Ekart. Baal then escapes and is on the run. He evades the police, but his declining health forces him into a wooden hut where his only means

of escape is to crawl out into the night. His body is discovered by the woodcutters who give him a proper burial.

Opinions vary as to what inspired Brecht to write Baal; some scholars say that Brecht wrote the play as a response piece to Der Einsame (The Loner) by Hanns Johst, who later became a notorious Nazi dramatist. Brecht read *Der Einsame* while taking a class from acclaimed professor Artur Kutscher. Brecht did not like the play, and thus he set out to write Baal “for the purpose of demolishing a weak theatrical success by means of a ludicrous conception of genius and amorality” (Völker 44). Those who consider Baal as an Einsame counter-play interpret Baal as the poet Grabbe, Johannes as the doctor Hans Eckardt, and Ekart as the musician Walkmüller. This interpretation is widely recognized by several scholars; yet Brecht provided a copy of Baal to Artur Kutscher in 1917, a year before Der Einsame was even produced. Baal cannot respond to something that came after it. Also, Brecht was not taking Kutscher’s classes yet so it is improbable that he had any previous exposure to Johst’s play. It is possible, however, that Brecht’s rewrites were influenced by Der Einsame, but the primary cause for writing Baal could not be in direct response, despite Ronald Speirs’ assertion that: “The immediate stimulus for the drama was Brecht’s dislike of a play entitled Der Einsame (The Lonely One) by the minor Expressionist dramatist Hanns Johst” (18). Speirs’ insight about Brecht’s dislike of Johst’s Der Einsame is factual; there is a story that claims that Brecht said he could write a better play in only three days; despite this claim, the play—possibly due to the war—took him months to write, and he kept revising it his entire life, perhaps because of his fascination with the text: “There was so

much of himself in the character of Baal that Brecht remained fascinated by it all his life” (Völker 44).

Yet Baal is not so much autobiography as it is hero worship, or worship of an anti-hero—a counter-cultural icon, poet, diarist, and cabaret artist—all the *personae* of Wedekind. Baal lives a bohemian lifestyle—dwelling in an attic, writing poetry and music, traveling around the city, going to numerous bars, taverns, and cafés—while destroying nearly everyone he has a relationship with. As Baal progresses, he becomes more unruly, and begins to more and more to resort to violence: raping Ekart’s lover out of jealousy, and trying to force Ekart into a sexual relationship. Baal’s “love” for him is not returned, however, so Baal kills Ekart. This gruesome ending is where Baal and Wedekind’s biographies differ greatly, of course. Whereas Baal continues to spiral downward as his life progresses, Wedekind begins to mellow out— getting married, having children, and settling down to domestic life—a side of Wedekind’s character that Brecht chose to ignore.

Baal, like Brecht, was a poet, an artist, and a womanizer. However, unlike Brecht, Baal has absolutely no regard for any establishment, fighting against all political structures, social norms, and religion—a personality that more closely resembles the counter-cultural image of Frank Wedekind, who stood against the social establishment and protested against the ills of government and religion in his plays and cabaret performances. The only comment Brecht makes about Baal’s origins comes from his note on the play, which says: “Baal deals with the life of a man who actually existed. He was a certain Josef K” (Brecht Early Plays 15). Yet the note is dated 1926, eight years

after the initial composition of the play. Moreover, Brecht made numerous revisions to the text throughout his lifetime, provoking speculation about whether or not the text was adapted to fit this “Josef K.”

Wedekind and Baal share numerous biographical similarities. Baal has a birth of mythical proportions that Brecht presents to isolate him, keeping him on the fringe of society. Likewise, Wedekind was born to American citizens and was even conceived in America. He was considered an American by many of his classmates, and he was fascinated with America and American culture. Wedekind’s American heritage made him in some ways an outsider because he was never fully German; in fact, he never bothered to get his German papers. Baal and Wedekind both represented the bohemian, countercultural movement. They both sought out women with whom to have relations, making it the ultimate goal:

Once a woman, Baal says, gives her all

Leave her; that’s as far as she can go

Other men should represent no risk at all;

Even Baal is scared of babies, though. (Brecht Baal 4)

Baal does not father any illegitimate children—because he is “scared” of them—similar to Wedekind’s aversion to marriage and domesticity as a younger man. Martin Esslin characterizes Wedekind’s search for women as a part of a campaign for free love: “This ecstatic prose of Brecht’s first play also shows the influence of another great rebel among German dramatists, Frank Wedekind... who spent his life struggling for the sexual liberation of mankind... acted in his own plays and sang his ballads in the Munich

cabarets” (Esslin 100). This sexual liberation is certainly lived out by Baal through his voracious and indiscriminate desire for men and women alike.

Wedekind had a formal education but rejected being forced to study the Law. He seemed only to be interested in studying the subjects that fascinated him. Like Wedekind, Brecht rejected the notion of forced study, opting on many occasions to enroll for classes, allowing his father to pay for them, and then withdrawing from the class to pocket the money. Baal, too, has no formal education; with his rejection of bourgeois manners and sneering at the establishment, it can be argued that he would have followed the same path as Brecht. Baal’s anti-authoritarian streak hardly seems compatible with a classroom, anyway; his gifts and magnetism get him all he desires in life—music, poetry, food, booze, and women. There is no indication from Wedekind’s diaries that he was given to drinking like Baal. Baal’s drinking wrecks havoc: it alienates his friends, who, on numerous occasions, tell him he has had too much: “Drinking makes him evil” and “You shouldn’t drink so much” (Brecht Baal 16 and 26). Baal even enables Johannes’ alcoholism, not only introducing him to alcohol, but by sleeping with his fiancée, Johanna, and driving him to drink.

Baal begins the play as Wedekind’s alter ego, *Der Bänkelsänger*, singing a song that celebrates sex. Like Wedekind’s diary, Baal’s song is a narrative about sexual conquest:

And that girl the world, who gives herself and giggles
 If you only let her crush you with her thighs,
 Shared with Baal, who loved it, orgiastic wriggles.

But he did not die. He looked her in the eyes. (Brecht Baal: Early Plays 20)

Baal desires to sleep with women, and he uses everything at his disposal to get them. His position as a hip counter-cultural figure has gained him some fame and an invitation to a dinner party; yet Baal is not interested in anything at the party except for the food, drink, and women. When the publisher brings up the subject of getting Baal published, Baal completely ignores it. He chooses to ignore the offer to get his poems published, saying, “What are my poems to you?” (Brecht Baal 8). He seems uninterested in money or popularity. Similarly, Wedekind’s uncompromising stance against censorship, especially in the first half of his career, limited his growth as a playwright. To a fan like Brecht, he must have seemed uninterested in commercial, material gain—an idealistic and admirable notion to a young rebel like him. Wedekind’s fight against the censors led him to reject altering his plays, whereas Brecht was much more apt to change his plays enough to get them past the censors. Baal, however, is not a playwright—he is a poet and singer/songwriter, and has no battles with censors. One possible reason for this choice is that Brecht actually saw Wedekind’s cabaret performance where he had less concern for the censors.

Brecht also models Baal’s ability to scandalize his audience on Wedekind’s ability to do the same. In the “Night Cloud” tavern—scene 7—Baal is thrust on stage half naked, an allusion perhaps, to Wedekind’s reported disrobing before his audience. Baal’s performance is received by “*Applause in the café, with cries of ‘Boo!’ Baal goes on singing, and the commotion continues to grow as the song becomes more indecent. At*

the end, an enormous tumult in the café” (Brecht Baal 27). The commotion is so strong that Baal has to escape out the bathroom window. Although there is no account of Wedekind sneaking out of a window to escape a riot, one can easily imagine him sneaking out of the room he has shared with one of his women.

Another similarity to Wedekind merits discussion: before Baal kills Ekart, he listens to Watzmann utter the line: “Two times two is four” (Brecht Baal 52). This line was Frank Wedekind’s motto, according to Eric Bentley: “His chosen motto was $2 \times 2 = 4$ ” (Bentley “Nine Notes” 13). Wedekind liked this motto because it explained his world in a practical, cold, and ordered way, regardless of the chaos that surrounded him. Spring Awakening reflects this motto, with the lesson being clear. For Spring Awakening, the lesson is that sexual repression leads to negative consequences for the younger generation (sexual repression \times younger generation = negative consequences). Brecht has left this small clue behind, but the line cannot be spoken by Baal, for at this point in the story, Baal has broken away from being the reincarnation of Wedekind. Brecht, it seems, has examined one possible outcome for Wedekind’s life, had he continued with his liberated, free-love lifestyle.

Baal’s running from the police recalls Wedekind’s fleeing from the law after committing *Majestätsbeleidigung*, but his violent act, of course, and the circumstances of his flight bear no resemblance to Wedekind’s less glamorous crime and flight. Baal’s running from the authorities leads to a sudden onset of bad health—similar to Wedekind’s sudden onset of pain that led to his death—and Baal dies alone on the road. Wedekind, on the other hand, died suddenly and was surrounded by people; he

certainly did not die alone, alienated from his friends. His funeral was well attended by those who respected and admired him. It seems the turning point is where Brecht takes the life of Wedekind and examines what would have happened to him had he continued on the path of free love and lasciviousness. Whereas Wedekind finally settled down and married Tilly, Baal continued to alienate his friends and carry on with his anti-everything lifestyle, which ultimately leads to his death.

In creating his portrait of Baal—his re-creation of Wedekind—Brecht exhibited the key elements of Wedekind's personality ("his greatest work"), but did not attempt a life study. By making clear parallels between Wedekind's life, and Baal's, Brecht seems to be drawing the reader to the conclusion that Baal is Brecht's reincarnated vision of Wedekind, although not taken to the extreme. It is a study in what might have happened to Wedekind had he not settled down and chosen the more conventional lifestyle. Brecht has created a piece that is an homage to his idol, and is a way in which his idol can live on forever—perhaps this is why Brecht continued to edit the play throughout his life.

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