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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Noah Porter Soltau entitled "Insurgent Spectacles: *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, *Mother Courage* and the 'New' Broadway Spectacle." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in German.

Daniel H. Magilow, Major Professor

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**Insurgent Spectacles: *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, *Mother Courage* and the 'New'
Broadway Spectacle**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Noah Porter Soltau

December 2014

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the political and ideological work done by what I call "insurgent spectacles," which comprised a historical episode of American theater occurring primarily from 2006 to 2008. The spectacles had liberatory and redemptive potential not in spite of their identity as mass culture, but indeed precisely because of it. They functioned in a contested political and ideological space within the schema of mass culture. The insurgent spectacle is so-called because it superficially resembled other bits of Broadway fluff with its glitziness, over-production, and ham-fistedness that allow the audience to be intellectually disengaged. During this episode, it persisted (often unexpectedly) in delivering a subversive political or ideological message to the audience, both in its content and in its mode of expression. This mode of spectacularity did not conform to prevailing pessimistic notions of what a Broadway spectacle is, and the dissertation theorizes terms under which mass culture is not reduced to capitalist instrumentality, historicizes it, and offers readings of works that exemplify this mode of spectacularity from three revolutionary dramatists who are regularly discussed in the same critical breath: Frank Wedekind, Georg Büchner, and Bertolt Brecht. Adaptations of works by these playwrights are the primary examples that stood at the center of the movement toward insurgent spectacles. In particular analysis of the 2006 productions of *Spring Awakening* and *Mother Courage and her Children* and the 2008 production of *Woyzeck* add nuance to popular critical approaches to mass culture in current scholarship.

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Introduction

Insurgent Spectacles: A New Mode of Spectacularity

New York City's 42nd Street, between Times Square and 8th Avenue, was once infamous as a "porn-plagued, drug-infested, crime-ridden" warren of grindhouses and peep shows.¹ Then, over the course of the late 90s, Disney's Michael Eisner took on the project of awakening the sleeping and once-grand theaters of that neighborhood, and bringing them to life with vibrant spectacle, like a Prince Charming to NYC's Sleeping Beauty. Now, the lighted signs for the myriad Broadway musical spectacles glitter to draw spectators into seats. About twelve million people a year frequent New York City's dozens of Broadway and off-Broadway theaters. In a given week, the theatrical entertainment can vary from Shakespeare to a stage version of a Disney movie, and the major Broadway shows alone bring in an average of \$19.2 million a week.²

The wide variety of productions available to the throngs of patrons can be classified under an equally large number of modes of spectacularity—that is, the means by which a spectacle is produced, distributed, and consumed. For the purpose of my argument and in keeping with the thinking of Guy Debord and Siegfried Kracauer, spectacles are mass cultural events that subsume social life into a relationship of commodities. They undermine the revolutionary and liberating potential of art and retard audiences' social and political energy with distraction and consumption. This dissertation explores the political and ideological work done by what I call "insurgent spectacles," which I argue comprised a historical episode of American theater, occurring primarily from 2006 to 2008, that had liberatory and redemptive potential not

¹ Rose, "Can Disney Tame 42nd Street?"

² Financial data courtesy of The Broadway League.

in spite of their identity as mass culture, but indeed precisely because of it. They functioned in a contested political and ideological space within the schema of mass culture.

The language of insurgency is particularly applicable to this project and these types of spectacles because of their political concerns and their staging during the heights of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the term “insurgent” was and continues to be used as a proxy for “terrorist” in the mass media, the reality of insurgency is that it indicates, if not covert, then at least not organized and official resistance to a governing power. Applied rhetorically, this governing power is the spectacle as it has developed under neoliberalism, and the insurgency is represented in part by the mode of spectacle that this dissertation examines.

The insurgent spectacle is so-called because it superficially resembled other bits of Broadway fluff with its glitziness, over-production, and ham-fistedness that allow the audience to “bring the kids, leave the IQ at home.” During this episode, it persisted (often unexpectedly) in delivering a subversive political or ideological message to the audience, both in its content and in its mode of expression.³ This mode of spectacularity did not conform to prevailing pessimistic notions of what a Broadway spectacle is, and the dissertation theorizes terms under which mass culture is not reduced to capitalist instrumentality, historicizes it, and offers readings of works that exemplify this mode of spectacularity from three revolutionary dramatists who are regularly discussed in the same critical breath: Frank Wedekind, Georg Büchner, and Bertolt Brecht. Works by these playwrights are the primary examples that stood at the center of the movement toward insurgent spectacles. In particular, the 2006 productions of *Spring Awakening* and *Mother*

³ Isherwood, “Sex and Rock?”

Courage and her Children, and the 2008 production of *Woyzeck* call into question, or at least add nuance to, two popular (and frequently binary) critical approaches in current scholarship.⁴

The first popular theoretical pole is a pessimistic reading of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's influential theory of the Culture Industry, which stigmatizes all products of capitalist mass culture as necessarily oppressive, manipulative, and without revelatory or revolutionary potential. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* often ends up as an argumentative whipping boy. Its central argument is often misread to claim that popular culture fulfills a simple industrial function, producing standardized cultural commodities that manipulate, distract, and oppress the masses into passivity. This simplistic reading of this text and other key writings on mass culture from Adorno's oeuvre marginalizes the ghosts in the machine of culture, to which Adorno points and the importance of which he stresses. Adorno's (and more generally, the Frankfurt-School-in-exile's) physical and philosophical connections both to Hollywood and New York City make the application of that school of thought to the insurgent spectacle all the more pressing.

The other pole to the cultural analyses of the Frankfurt School is a line of argument claiming that most if not all artifacts of mass culture have deep and definite political and ideological positions not necessarily limited to the perpetuation of the capitalist, bourgeois status-quo.⁵ The rise in popularity of Cultural Studies as a method of cultural critique has brought the ephemera of mass culture to the forefront of some fields of academic study, under the central assertion that the masses can and do reclaim art and representation from the

⁴ A note on titles: for the purpose of this dissertation, *Spring Awakening* and *Mother Courage* will refer to the English-language Broadway adaptations, while *Frühlings Erwachen* and *Mutter Courage* will refer to Wedekind's and Brecht's works, respectively. As *Woyzeck* does not undergo a lexical change, I will simply indicate to which text I am referring by using the name of the author, either Gardarsson for the adaptation, or Büchner for the original.

⁵ Stuart Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, a Reader*, makes this claim. The reader offers a more general discussion of the role of politics in popular culture.

machinations of global capitalism. In contrast to the wary (and, again, often pessimistic) theorizing of members of the Frankfurt School, recent scholarship within Cultural Studies insists on the purposive, politically active (and often conservative) nature of a wide variety of seemingly frivolous (but ultimately politically conservative) spectacles.⁶ Somewhere on this spectrum is the theoretical space of this dissertation.

I posit that, contained in the Frankfurt School's supposedly pessimistic conclusions about mass culture from over the decades, especially the writings of Adorno, we see hints of this redemptive mode of spectacle. Coupled with that are more optimistic readings of Walter Benjamin (including "A look at Chaplin," "What is Epic Theater?" and "The Task of the Translator"), as well as concepts drawn from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Bertolt Brecht, Guy Debord, Alexander Kluge and Siegfried Kracauer, among others, that take into account the role that theater, vaudeville, the circus, and other forms of organized senselessness, spontaneity, and spectacularity in political life that may not be totally subsumed to capitalist instrumentality. To advance this argument, I historicize and analyze this recent corpus of spectacles that embodied (or at least tried to embody) a liberatory and critical possibility for mass culture. What united these spectacles was a commitment to (German revolutionary) theater's historically privileged political role, a shared aesthetic of (rock) stardom, and an embrace of certain kinds of subversive spectacularity. The subsequent readings of these productions show how the historical political German dramas functioned within the 21st century American framework of the insurgent spectacle.

⁶ Joshua Newman and Michael Giardina, in *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation: Consumption and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberalism*, offer a model for making cultural and political critiques using mass spectacles as their source material. I argue that the insurgent spectacle stands in political opposition to the spectacle of NASCAR and its political goals.

In the first chapter, I sketch the cultural background against which these spectacles played out, including global financial and environmental crises, the intractable “War on Terror,” and a host of both international and domestic sites of social conflict, including rape, suicide, sexual abuse, and abortion, and establish my theory of the insurgent spectacle in part by taking a close look at Adorno’s critique of mass culture in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” *Aesthetic Theory, Philosophy of New Music* and “The Schema of Mass Culture,” which are often read to push the notion that all mass cultural products are subservient to the continuation of the system of capital in which they are produced.⁷ In fact, Adorno makes allowances for spectacle that is “self-justifying,” and which grounds itself in the human body in “defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art.”⁸ This physicality took on many and different forms in these spectacles, but in each case, it allowed the actors and thereby the productions to slip the “schematic reason which compels everything to prove its significance and effect.”⁹ Like the juggler, or performers in a variety show, the lack of affect from the performers, the performance for performance’s sake, slipped the seemingly inexorable reification of “schematic reason” and opened up the production to the singular attentiveness and un-self-conscious reflection of the audience.

In the insurgent spectacles, this self-justified physicality and artistic focus on the body and spontaneity, whether that be singing, dancing, or performing aerial acrobatics, did not preclude careful stagecraft and layers of textual meaning, which are ample. Rather, it provided moments in the productions that alternately allowed the audience to forget that they were watching a carefully planned performance, and also to revel in the moments when the obvious

⁷ Bronfen, “Reality Check,” 20-46.

⁸ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 81.

⁹ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 81.

artifice of the production drew attention to the theatrical space, and the political and ideological work the production was trying to accomplish in it. There are obvious points of tension between the majority of mass culture and the insurgent spectacle, for instance, the moments when audiences were shocked from the diegetic space of the drama and into the space of the theater. In this space, actors and audience members both enacted and recognized the critical political discourse that is part of the insurgent spectacle. However, there are other, more subtle indicators that require closer readings of a variety of theoretical texts and cannot rely simply on a rehashing of Brecht's concept of Epic Theater.¹⁰

To further my contention that this innovative mode of spectacle was both an artifact of mass culture and an effective political tool, I deploy a reading of Bakhtin and his concept of the carnivalesque that allows these spectacles to participate in that rich subversive theatrical tradition. Further parsing and re-reading of Adorno's aforementioned writings on mass culture, Benjamin's texts and Kracauer's and Debord's discussions of the spectacle and its roles in modern capitalist society lay the theoretical ground work for the possibility of a different kind of spectacle. This spectacle is the insurgent spectacle, which functioned somewhere between the capitalist instrumentalities that many in the Frankfurt School feared and the less malevolent, more independent, consumer-driven commodities often theorized in more recent criticism of popular culture.¹¹ These re-readings of well-known cultural critical texts in fact work in conjunction with more recent writings (by Peeren and Hall, for example) which posit that mass culture is not monolithically detrimental or acceptable to audiences.¹² This apparently obvious negotiation, however, is firmly grounded both on the unpredictability of audiences' responses to

¹⁰ Benjamin, "Was ist das epische Theater?" and Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater*.

¹¹ Newman and Danesi, *X-Rated*, among others.

¹² Peeren, *Intersubjectivities*.

objects of mass culture and the high political and financial stakes that are won and lost in its production. In this reading of mass culture's role, it becomes less a tool of the Marxist superstructure, and more of a "constant battlefield," on which cultural producers fight for the attention, capital, and political and ideological allegiances of their audiences.¹³ This space of political and ideological conflict was precisely the site of the insurgent spectacle.

These thinly veiled cultural conflicts find their predecessors clearly in the traditions of carnival (in the aping or subversion of official culture), in the early days of the circus (in the fight for capital by means of the spectacle and the body), and later in the cult of the Hollywood star (in the power and aura of a name to draw crowds and to manage audience behavior and expectation). The following chapters trace analogous conflicts within the productions. I historicize the works' progressive tendencies through close readings of the texts as well as analyses of historical and contemporary criticism. In this way, I demonstrate how this episode of liberatory spectacle attempted to accomplish its political goals. Additionally, I show how this mode of spectacularity worked in concert with the revolutionary or liberatory content of the classic German dramas to further the agendas of both producer and text. Put another way: I rely on historical and contemporary critical reaction to the works to analyze the texts' revolutionary or liberatory elements and then demonstrate how, in this mode of spectacle, those elements appeared (changed or otherwise) in the new adaptations.

Following this introductory chapter about the precedents for the insurgent spectacle and the theoretical models it implies, the next three chapters of the dissertation are devoted to case studies of individual productions: Steven Sater, Duncan Sheik, and Michael Mayer's production of *Spring Awakening* (2006), Gísli Örn Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* (2008), and Tony Kushner and

¹³ Hall, "Deconstructing the Popular," 442.

George C. Wolfe's *Mother Courage and her Children* (2006). These chapters provide readings of the texts' critical histories, as well as close readings of the texts themselves, which have until now been limited to journalistic spheres or middle-brow book reviews, but the unifying spectacular aspects of which have not been considered as a whole, or as a politically active theoretical construct. These readings provide an opportunity to reappraise the canonical plays upon which these works were based and reconsider their roles both in the literary canon and within the purview of mass culture.

The first case study examines Sater and Mayer's production of *Spring Awakening*. This play serves as a rich entry point into the mode of the insurgent spectacle and the uncertain ground it occupied within the space of 21st century capitalist mass culture. It was a seven-time Tony Award-winning Broadway blockbuster, intended as a vanity project and assumed financial flop, which then saw its leading pair scooped up to star in the hit television series *Glee*. In particular, this spectacle focused on the lure of sex and death as material for cultural consumption as well as the source of liberatory impulses, both human and artistic. Using the diegetic "ruptures" of a rock concert that takes place synchronically with the drama, Sater and Sheik provided moments of interiority and metacommentary for the characters with the songs that populate Mayer's staging. Mayer in turn drew audience attention to these often politically critical moments in the drama with bright neon, spotlights, and hand-held microphones—technology centuries removed from the play's 19th century setting.

The fragmented stage aesthetic of stereotypically drab 19th century Germany on the one hand and the neon lights and hand-held microphones of a 21st century rock concert on the other set the tone for the production, which also jumped between spare, often dour dialogue and pop-musical interludes. Sater and Mayer employed this aesthetic for their explicitly "pro-choice"

adaptation of a play that still enjoys a reputation of being subversive. In fact, according to Sol Gittlemann, one of Wedekind's American critics during the Vietnam era, Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* "initiated a revolution in drama that is still continuing."¹⁴ One of this chapter's central claims is that this statement holds true for Sater's version, as well. *Spring Awakening* treated teenagers as dramatic subjects with equal parts humor and gravity, and took as its major leitmotifs sex and mortality. While many Broadway musicals can claim to touch on these subjects (often only to titillate), *Spring Awakening* both displayed and commented on a wide spectrum of topical issues related to sex and violence, including: sexual education, birth control, abortion, rape, sexual abuse, sado-masochism, masturbation, and homosexuality. Concurrently, the play examined and challenged the social constructs of school and bourgeois family life, and the avenues of escape available to teenagers, including suicide. *Spring Awakening* seated frank deliberation on these subjects, which are largely taboo or marginalized, in a formally novel way. It embedded them in a pop cultural framework that relied on the energy of its young stars (teenagers play teenagers) and rock spectacle to constantly unsettle and engage audiences by proffering earnest discourse about social hot topics one moment and belting out rock and pop ballads the next.

It is telling that, after only a few seasons on Broadway, the show's lead actress, Leah Michelle, was picked up by a new Fox Network show, *Glee*, which would give her starlet status and propel her to the front of fashion and lifestyle magazines across the country, both for her role in *Glee* and as a Revlon girl. Sater and Mayer's financially and culturally successful amalgam of discussing hot-button social issues to a pop sound track was appropriated by major media outlets and used to great commercial effect by the *Glee* and *High School Musical* franchises, who then

¹⁴ Sater, foreword and Sol Gittlemann, *Frank Wedekind*, 52.

largely abandoned the dark material of sexuality and mortality, and the concomitant social and political criticism, as well as very much original musical composition.¹⁵ Instead, they opted for made-for-TV morality and formulaic plot lines accompanied by re-hashed show tunes.

There is ample evidence that these insurgent spectacles were under constant threat of absorption into other modes of spectacularity that rob them of their political impact. The chapter will address that threat and situate *Spring Awakening* within these larger critical and financial concerns, then show how it succeeded as politically progressive art where other mass cultural artifacts did not. It examines how this rendition of the play built on the socially progressive history and subversive style of *Frühlings Erwachen* even as it established a new mode of insurgent spectacularity. The controversial political and social elements of the historical text become evident through the history of its criticism, and these same elements, often enough, are present in Sater's adaptation. By tracing these elements and showing how they appeared in the Sater/Sheik production, I seat this political and social criticism both within the text and within the songs of the production, which acted as a kind of coincident rock concert and running commentary on the action of the drama. This approach develops the mode of the insurgent spectacle by showing the ways in which ideology and criticism unexpectedly and persistently appeared in styles of expression traditionally reserved only for distraction or catharsis. I argue, in short, that *Spring Awakening* was able to deliver its politically progressive ideology to a wide swath of the theater-going public, because it combined elements of traditional stage drama with those of the modern spectacle, which simultaneously distract and inform the viewer. *Spring Awakening* and the other productions to follow avoided both the heavy-handedness of activist drama and the apolitical (or reactionary) stance of the modern (neoliberal) spectacle by

¹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer (in "The Culture Industry") and Kracauer (in "Little Shopgirls") discuss how capitalism assimilates genuine moments of resistance.

constantly assailing the viewer with different forms of artistic expression and different facets of a broad progressive political agenda.

While *Spring Awakening* embodied the insurgent mode mainly through aesthetic shifts and pop musical commentary, chapter three examines another key example of this spectacle that took a different approach. Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* brought acrobatic physicality and a sense of carnival to bear as further weapons to use against the neoliberal spectacle. The Vesturport Theater's production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music received mixed critical reviews, and it is from these mixed reviews that the specific mode of this theatrical spectacle reveals itself. Critics described it negatively as "a glitzy cartoon" rife with "gimmickry," and accused the production of putting on circus airs, rather than treating the text and subject of "Woyzeck" with what the critics deemed the appropriate gravitas.¹⁶

The gimmickry, of course, is the pry bar which I use to open up this spectacle. It is Adorno's purposeful purposelessness, Benjamin's destruction of an artwork's fraudulent "aura" (and more, positively, the same work's *Fortleben*, or "afterlife,"¹⁷) and Kracauer's "ruptures" that he finds in the circus-like "anarchy" of low-brow cinema, for instance.¹⁸ The political power of this apparent gimmickry was what made this production of *Woyzeck* so unique, and allowed it to stand out from other, more common, experimental or avant-garde productions. The chapter's discussion of *Woyzeck*'s historical and contemporary political engagement shows how Gardarsson's script and staging both made use and was critical of its physical and dramatic devices. The production's self-awareness and self-reference in turn drew the audience's attention to the *Affentheater* (after the Drum Major's comment to Woyzeck, that he is the "monkey" to the

¹⁶ Sellars, "Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*."

¹⁷ Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," 12.

¹⁸ Levin, introduction, 5.

Drum Major's "man") of contemporary capitalist geopolitics and theater. This playful self-consciousness brought to the viewer's mind the spectacle of the circus. Indeed, the chapter continues with an analysis of the role that the theater space itself played in the spectacle. In addition, the chapter will build a theoretical framework to bring the importance of the stage into context, in particular the similarities this theater stage had with the circus tent, and the importance those parallels gave to the performance as a whole.

Woyzeck has a long interpretive history as a piece of politically progressive theater (except, tellingly, during the Third Reich) that, depending on the political and literary climate in which critics reviewed the work, excoriates different institutions or literary forms.¹⁹ I make use of some of this historical criticism to provide support for the claims I make about *Woyzeck* and the way the play is structured, as well as performed. I argue that this adaptation of *Woyzeck* fulfilled the text's historical role as a lode-stone for the expression of social and political dissatisfaction, as well as the site of fierce literary debates concerning the social role and nature of theatrical drama. By engaging with these subjects, Gardarsson's production added to the complexity and depth of the ongoing critical debate about Büchner and particularly *Woyzeck*, at the same time pioneering, through the use of textual, visual, and musical elements, a piece of musical theater that began to undo the stigma associated with modern Broadway productions, namely: that they are vacuous pieces of cultural fast-food designed only with the object of making money in mind.

The chapter begins by setting the discursive boundaries of the production, that is, the social and political goals the artists producing the play intended it to accomplish, by looking at material from the director, Gardarsson, and musician Nick Cave, rock star, song writer, and

¹⁹ Richards, *Georg Büchner's Woyzeck*, 27.

front-man for the Australian group *The Bad Seeds*. It becomes clear from even a cursory examination of their ideas about art and performance that they intended for their version of *Woyzeck* to be even more subversive and shocking than the benchmark, from their point of view, by which all versions of Büchner's play should be judged: Werner Herzog's 1979 film *Woyzeck*. Whereas Herzog's film relied in large part on brutality to convey *Woyzeck*'s plight, Gardarsson and Cave relied on the conceits of the circus, on distraction and physicality and purposelessness, to examine the social and political conditions of their subjects.

I first seat the aesthetics of the production within the tradition of the carnival or circus, as the play drew its inspiration from the mockery and physicality found there. The subsequent analysis of the text and songs establishes the political and ideological stakes at play in *Woyzeck*. The reading breaks up the production into what critic Helmut Krapp refers to as *statuarische Momente* (statuary moments), or moments that are static, repeated, intended that audiences might take notice of them.²⁰ After I read these statuary moments separately, I seat them contextually within the production to reveal how and why they serve the larger goals of this politically progressive form of spectacularity. The chapter highlights both how *Woyzeck* conformed to its historical use as blunt protest theater, and how its polished and seemingly superfluous and silly elements also served to reinforce the text's politics in a more subtle and perhaps more effective way.

The fourth chapter, the final case study, looks at Tony Kushner and George C. Wolfe's *Mother Courage and her Children*. Starring Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline, the production's celebrity power was its biggest draw. The major political tension of the production develops between its criticism and its content, to the attention paid to the actors and producers as such,

²⁰ Krapp, *Der Dialog bei Georg Büchner*, 85.

rather than to the performance and content of the play. This dissonance between critical voices, and between Kushner's political goals for the project and its reception, revealed the contested space in which the insurgent spectacle functioned, and ultimately the limits of its effectiveness in confronting the schema of mass culture. Bertolt Brecht's work should have been the ideal testing ground for this mode of spectacularity, since Brecht recognized even in the 1920s that cinema and mass culture had a political impact on art and spectatorship. Brecht actively aligned his theater against what he saw as the corrosive effects of overly absorbing modes of mass culture. When Kushner and Wolfe populated their drama with movie stars, they tested the validity of Epic Theater in the 21st century and showed some possibilities of how it may have changed.

Kushner took a canonical work by a German playwright known for his leftist revolutionary sentiments and made it into a spectacle for the American stage. Through its progressive politics, it would attempt to raise awareness of the globally destabilizing effects of the U.S. and its allies' wars in the Middle East, of the economy of war. The producers even staged this star-studded insurgent spectacle for free in New York's Central Park, that is, in the cultural heart of the nation leading the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The goal, then, was to use the idiom of Broadway spectacularity to articulate the possibility for political agency. However, *Mother Courage* did not achieve the same political or critical resonance as *Spring Awakening* or *Woyzeck*, due largely to the pronounced lack of self-reflexivity on the role that the spectacle's stars, Streep and Kline, play in a drama that so aggressively criticizes capitalism and its structures. Its music also played a role in the misfire. Rather than disrupt and draw the audience's attention to politics, it unified the performance and created a decidedly un-Brechtian illusionism.

The spectacle was not completely without its engaging political moments, however. Kushner's understanding of humor's importance for engaging audiences incited what Walter

Benjamin called (referring to the Charlie Chaplin film *The Circus*) “the most international and most revolutionary affect of the masses—laughter.” Laughter was a key element in this production and ones like it because “apart from the fact that this is the most difficult thing to achieve, it is also the most important in a social sense.”²¹ Laughter united the audience in the experience of the political spectacle, but it also united them insofar as (genuine) laughter distanced the audience from both the action and the performers on stage, which allowed for moments of critical thought and the recognition of collective action.

The tension between the draw and aura of the movie star head-liners and the tenets of Brechtian Epic Theater that Kushner tried to maintain in the text was the ideological and dramatic space in which the insurgent spectacle operated. Drawn to the production in large part because of the stars, not the political drama, audiences (and, in particular, theater critics) then experienced their star-idols in the flesh. Yet the actors managed to occasionally embody their Brechtian roles and did not allow the frenzy of stardom to overcome the liberatory and critical content of the text. Streep, Kline, and Kushner did not function entirely as instrumentalities of Hollywood-style spectacle and the cult of fame. Rather, they attempted to convert their cultural capital into political commentary on the stage. The critical reception teems with evidence of this ideological conflict, and the instances of obvious dissonance between the star and the role serve as plots on the aesthetic map, as it were, for moments of insurgent spectacle. This chapter explores the most problematic of the insurgent spectacles analyzed here by first critiquing the ideological approach of the producers and the deleterious effect that ideology, along with the celebrity of stage stars and producers alike, had on the spectacle. This analysis relies primarily on interviews with the stars and producers about their goals for the spectacle, corroborated or

²¹ McKay, “Walter Benjamin,” 311 and Benjamin, *Schriften*, 3:159.

undermined by evidence from the play's text and critical reception of the production. It then examines how Kushner's use of humor and obscene language, as well as music, was still able to create moments of liberatory potential within a spectacle largely coopted by the schema of mass culture, again by referencing contemporary criticism.

Those liberatory moments are what this dissertation seeks to examine, and so, by way of conclusion, I review how these productions in particular embodied this mode of spectacularity, point beyond them to other spectacles and areas of mass culture where similar phenomena appear, and show in what ways these spectacles had only liberatory potential, and how they have, since their staging, been subverted to capitalist instrumentality. By emphasizing the spectacles' engagement with the schema of mass culture, I hope to make this dissertation a part of a wider discussion about the roles of mass culture in political life. In particular, I think it is important to grasp how both producers and consumers might fight back (even unconsciously) against the hegemony of a culture industry based on the 24-hour news-cycle, corporate sponsorship, and the cult of celebrity. These productions make clear that not all objects of mass culture function solely as capitalist instrumentalities, but rather that there is space—even within a form of spectacle as (supposedly) saccharine and empty as the Broadway musical—to operate counter to neoliberal cultural trends, to be insurgent.

Chapter 1

Tracking the Insurgent Spectacle: Theory and History

Perhaps just as important as the insurgent spectacles is their historical and political context and the theoretic lenses through which to view them. What that historical and theoretical context reveals are the ways in which the insurgent spectacle undermined and opposed the aesthetic politics of other, more commercial contemporary spectacles. In many contemporary spectacles, (the nationalist/capitalist spectacle that frames and inundates NASCAR races, Hollywood films, and the 24 hour news cycle among them) the specter of the September 11th, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center is inescapable. Steven Sater, writer of the Tony-Award-winning Broadway adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen*, maintains that "After the [September] 11 attacks, producers believed that audiences wanted frothy, escapist fare."²² More than a decade later, the effects are still visible, in the art the American culture industry produces and the critical reactions to it. The attack on such a widely-recognized symbol of American wealth, prosperity, and prominence, and the ensuing "wars on terror" and global economic instability, created wide-spread fear and anxiety about America's (and Americans') position in the world. These anxieties were and are not merely abstract concerns, but rather manifest themselves in very personal ways, down to the entertainments we pursue, and how artists conceive and render the same.

Sater's own re-imagining of Wedekind's tale of abuse, rape, and suicide was neither frothy nor escapist. The accolades his show amassed, then, contradicted the assumption that American audiences either did not want or were not ready for serious drama. What the show's success demonstrated is that tackling topics like generational conflict, economic anxiety and

²² Ulaby, "Spring Awakening".

instability, and the intersection of morality and class were not taboo on Broadway. Rather, they were the driving forces behind its popular and critical acceptance. Not coincidentally, contemporary with *Spring Awakening*, other shows with similar concerns and produced in similar styles gained notoriety on the Broadway stage, specifically Tony Kushner's *Mother Courage and her Children* and Gisli Örn Gardarsson's *Woyzeck*.

Revolutionary German drama, if not in spite of, then perhaps because of these harsh elements became, according to the critics, "sexy."²³ It was bright, loud, and physical. It played to a younger crowd, the same group the hit television show *Glee* identified as its target audience, and without sacrificing the hard emotional and political truths that have made the texts both relevant and controversial throughout their performance histories. One of the main contributors to these three productions' popularity was their obvious and significant social criticism. For audiences uninterested in "frothy, escapist fare," there had been little offered on (or around) Broadway in the last decade. As with developments in art, photography, and film, both in the U.S. and internationally, these plays attempted to frame and at the same time react to the effects of large-scale social traumas, including terrorism and global financial instability, which were outside of their ostensible narratives.²⁴ The socially relevant topics with which these plays engaged range from rape, abuse, and sexual discovery to the global economic downturn, suicide, and the international War on Terror. The spectacles treated these issues in ways that one can productively analyze using the theoretical work on spectacle and mass culture found in the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, Kracauer, and Kluge, among others. The writings of these theorists in particular examine the wide-spread, overtly political, and often insidious nature of

²³ Billington, "Woyzeck", Isherwood, "Sex and Rock?", and Parles, "Shaking up 'Woyzeck'".

²⁴ Riegler, *Terrorismus*.

the capitalist spectacle, as well as offer aesthetic and political alternatives to it, and are therefore useful tools for analyzing this new form of spectacle.

Adorno and Horkheimer's concepts of the culture industry and the schema of mass culture are useful in establishing the insurgent spectacle's role, whether instrumental or disruptive, in mass culture. The concepts of the culture industry and the schema of mass culture put forward the idea that mass culture is organized to seamlessly integrate the people who consume it into larger systems of economic reproduction, effectively instrumentalizing them and thereby widening and strengthening the basis for capitalist economic growth. It becomes clear in their writings, and in those of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Siegfried Kracauer, Alexander Kluge and Guy Debord, that there is a persistent need in modernity for the kind of spectacle—the insurgent spectacle—that can undermine, expose, or otherwise oppose the manipulative and political power of other more established forms of mass culture. Adorno and Horkheimer provide a striking introduction to the political and cultural stakes of the spectacle and its enervating potential. Bertolt Brecht proposed a potential antidote to this enervation and the insidious rise of far right-wing politics with his concept of Epic Theater, and the influence of this mode of theater profoundly affected many of the theories and responses to the manipulation of mass culture that followed. The insurgent spectacle followed in the Brechtian theatrical tradition, and, adopting Walter Benjamin's concept of the *Fortleben*, or afterlife, of a work, the insurgent spectacles deployed artifacts of German high art in novel and politically progressive ways within a 21st century American context. Adorno and Brecht's somewhat grim assessments of mass culture are tempered somewhat by Siegfried Kracauer, whose work gives the insurgent spectacle more of an opening to work politically in the gulf between capitalist rationality and human reasoning.

One example from outside of the theater of progressive spectacle antagonizing the tenets of the much more common neoliberal spectacle is in the work of filmmaker and author Alexander Kluge. In both his films and his writings, Kluge applies Brechtian theatrical principles, and the diversity of his artistic modes demonstrate the progressive political potential of yet another mode, the insurgent spectacle. Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, firmly establishes the political need for the insurgent spectacle with his claim that politics are cemented through “the control of cultural practice.”²⁵ Evidence of that control reveals itself in the form of “the machinery of permitted consumption,” and that machinery is the subject of recent theoretical work on popular culture by Amber Day, John Lough, and Joshua Newman, among others.²⁶

The insurgent spectacle deployed many of the key concepts the above theorists develop in their critique of the spectacle: carnivalesque and corporeal dramatic techniques, historicizing and politicizing drama, and reinforcing the techniques and political necessity of alienation. In addition to those traditional redoubts of the avant-garde, however, these productions also relied on dramatic and physical apparatuses that share the trappings of other Broadway spectacles: humor, personal conflict, singing, lights, sets, and music designed to distract and elicit emotive, uncritical responses. Without these attributes, and without the high cultural provenance of their source material, these spectacles would lose their political and aesthetic effectiveness, and blend in to the cultural white noise of so much else that appears on Broadway. The insurgent spectacle’s political potential can only be partially attributed to its physical apparatus and dramatic material, however. The remainder of its political clout comes from the unconventional

²⁵ Downes and Miller, *Media Studies*, 25.

²⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 86.

ways it engaged with hotly contested cultural and political events, including sexual politics, war, and the global economy.

The Cultural Landscape of the Insurgent Spectacle: Sex, Violence, Death, and War

Within mass culture, the spectacle often subsumes the material conditions of existence for those who consume it. That is, it reproduces and normalizes those conditions in order to make them uncontroversial, even invisible. Alongside the development of mass media and vacillating global political and economic instability, critics and theorists have for decades been looking for works of art and modes of expression that undermine this spectacular trend and address what they see as threats both to physical and intellectual life. The insurgent spectacle engaged those threats earnestly, and in ways that simultaneously exposed the facile or even negligent ways in which other popular spectacles treat these important subjects. One critical aspect of the insurgent spectacle is that it drew attention to these conditions using techniques similar to the spectacles that obscure them. Sex and sexual politics were pressing issues in all three of the insurgent spectacles. *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck* most explicitly commented on the contemporary social conditions of sexuality, but *Mother Courage* engaged this discourse as well, insofar as *Mother Courage* must negotiate herself and her children through the economy and politics of war, both as an entrepreneur and a woman. The empirical data that correspond to these social phenomena seat the journalistic commentary on the spectacles' artistic criticism and the close readings of the texts in the following chapters within a concrete historical milieu. In order for the historical impact and necessity of the insurgent spectacle to become clear, the social conditions surrounding the texts' major thematic concerns deserve some exploration and enumeration,

starting with the most severe interpersonal traumas and increasing in scope to international economic and political concerns.

In the US, there are fewer acts of violence more controversial or intimate than rape. Representation of that act in such a public forum as the theater and in the guise of the insurgent spectacle was intended to raise awareness both of the trauma of the act itself, and of so-called “rape culture,” which is pervasive in some sectors of American society. According to a US Department of Justice survey of rape statistics contemporary with the insurgent spectacles, (2006), one in five rapes or sexual assaults against women was committed by an intimate partner. Expanding on the theme of intimacy and trauma, nearly sixty percent of rapes or sexual assaults against women were committed by an offender whom they knew. Those statistics are set against a background of a reporting incidence of less than fifty percent.²⁷ While the number of rapes makes *Spring Awakening*'s and *Woyzeck*'s graphic representations of it topical, the state of New York had the second-lowest incidence of rape in the country, which underscores the more pressing national scope of the issues addressed in the plays.²⁸

Wendla's rape holds a prominent position in Sater's *Spring Awakening*, as does her abortion.²⁹ Following nationwide legalization of abortion in 1973, abortions increased rapidly, reaching their highest levels in the 1980s. Subsequently, they have declined at a slow but steady pace, but with considerable variation across demographic populations.³⁰ The numbers, in this case, belie the visible national furor with which politicians and pundits, in particular, take up the polarizing subject of abortion. As a cultural hot button issue, abortion is hard to top in terms of

²⁷ Catalano, et al. “Female Victims of Violence.” Based on information gathered from interviews by the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), girls 12 or older experienced an estimated 182,000 rapes or sexual assaults in 2008. In New York in 2006, the year *Spring Awakening* premiered, there were 3,169 reported rapes.

²⁸ Uniform Crime Report, US Department of Justice.

²⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, xiv.

³⁰ Gamble, et al., “Abortion Surveillance,” 57.

short-term media attention. The statistics behind the cultural relevance of Wendla's rape and abortion are unnerving, but those behind Moritz's and (possibly) Woyzeck's suicides are even more so.³¹

Even though rape and suicide are national issues, they are intimate traumas. *Mother Courage and her Children*, as rendered by Tony Kushner, took national—indeed international—concerns like total war and the economy, and seated them within the context of one family's economic activities during war-time. The impact of Courage's actions and the devastating consequences of her diegetic war, however, are more easily understood within their contemporary economic and geo-political context. In terms of the economic well-being of the United States, recent political and by extension military decisions gravely aggravated the nation's foreign policy difficulties and domestic problems. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as on-going military operations in other nations, have pushed defense budgets up to near those of 1946.³² Those conflicts nearly doubled the nation's long-term debt, and they will ultimately cost trillions of dollars. Simultaneously, poor governmental and regulatory decisions helped create the conditions that lead to the devastating economic recession that began in 2007.³³

The economy of war, which is pervasive in Brecht's *Mutter Courage*, is as much a matter of urgent social concern today in the United States as it was in Germany during and after Second World War. Supplying goods and services to war-ravaged countries—in the case of the U.S. government, to Iraq and Afghanistan—to achieve economic and political stability (as well as, eventually, profit) is an old tactic of the state.³⁴ The application of U.S. foreign policy has not

³¹ Karch, et al., "Surveillance," 1-44. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for persons aged 25 to 34 years and the third leading cause for persons aged 10 to 24 years. The states which submitted data to the Centers for Disease Control concerning suicides reported 8,593 fatal suicide incidents and 8,599 suicides that occurred during 2006.

³² Koistinen, *State of War*, 236.

³³ Koistinen, *State of War*, 236.

³⁴ Coyne, *After War*, 158.

always gone smoothly, however, and those setbacks add up to hundreds of billions of dollars, not to mention loss of human life, which for Iraqis alone, according to some sources, in nearly half a million people.³⁵ What Brecht and Kushner showed, and what the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan confirm, is that the places which see the confluence of economy and war are dangerous and uncertain.³⁶

The costs of war are not merely measured in terms of the dollars taken from the treasury to fund the war effort, although those costs are great.³⁷ As symptomatic of larger political and cultural dysfunction, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are only part of larger global financial concerns. These concerns made themselves apparent both in Kushner's *Mother Courage* and Gardarrson's *Woyzeck*, where economic necessity and the crushing powers of the market drive the action on stage.

Analyses of the fallout from the global financial crisis and recession and the dangers of the economy of war reveal troubling consequences that found representation in both *Woyzeck* and *Mother Courage and her Children*. The groups that have been most impacted are those that have already been in a situation of significant precariousness such as children, women, and the poor.³⁸ The unequal burden-sharing of the fallout of the crisis—in terms of unemployment, reduced services in health and education, and a general insecurity—is spreading from the working class to the middle class.³⁹ The representation of this creeping class instability in the insurgent spectacles reminded audiences of harsh economic realities that reactionary or neoliberal spectacles seek to obscure or deny.

³⁵ Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq."

³⁶ Coyne, *After War*, 160-1, 163.

³⁷ Belasco, "The cost of Iraq," 1-5. With enactment of the sixth FY2011 Continuing Resolution (CR) through March 18, 2011, Congress approved a total of \$1.283 trillion for military operations, base security, reconstruction, foreign aid, embassy costs, and veterans' health care for the three operations initiated since the 9/11 attacks.

³⁸ Schuerkens, *Socioeconomic Outcomes*, 249.

³⁹ Schuerkens, *Socioeconomic Outcomes*, 250.

The general insecurity described above is a major thematic element in Gardarsson's *Woyzeck*. Furthermore, this insecurity, and the pressures of the military (or militaristic) system in which *Woyzeck* finds himself, leads him to (possibly) commit suicide. Soldier suicide was, at the time *Woyzeck* premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), nothing new to American audiences. It is even less so, now. That does not make its occurrence any less disturbing or the recognition of its prevalence any less urgent.^{40 41}

The recent increase in suicides parallels an increase in the prevalence of mental disorders across the army.⁴² This is an unsettling trend because, as of this writing, more soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have died as a result of suicide than in combat, and the U.S. still has at least 10,000 combat troops in theater in Afghanistan.⁴³ Clearly, then, the socially critical content of Büchner's *Woyzeck* was relevant contemporary audiences. The evident social traumas and their manipulation in the media outlined above describe the cultural theater (if, indeed, mass culture is a "battleground") in which the insurgent spectacle operated. This form of mass culture and its development continued the intellectual and political work of its historical antecedents. It did so in the guise of highly-produced megamusicals and star-studded dramas, indistinguishable from them until audiences are already in their seats and subject to the spectacles' politics and subversive aesthetics.

⁴⁰ Karch, "Surveillance," 20-23. The states that reported suicide data to the CDC revealed 1,596 suicides by former or current military personnel during 2006.

⁴¹ Bachynski, et al. "Mental Health Risk." A total of 255 soldiers committed suicide in 2007-8, and an analysis of historical trends suggested that 25-50% of those suicides may have been related to the major commitment of troops to combat beginning in 2003.

⁴² Bachynski, "Mental Health Risk."

⁴³ Williams. "Suicides Outpacing War Deaths."

The Political Origins and Stakes of the Insurgent Spectacle

The persistent historical political relevance and engagement of these dramas can in part be explained by Walter Benjamin's concept of a work's *Fortleben*, or afterlife.⁴⁴ For Benjamin, the afterlife of a work was a mystical quality that allowed its essential characteristics to be translated, even transmuted, into new and continually vital, or relevant, forms of art. For the insurgent spectacles, the *Fortleben* of *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* is their status not only as hallmarks of classic German political theater but as a new form of spectacle that works politically and can be read, like satirical television and film in pop culture. That is, following the work of cultural theorist Amber Day, they can be read in a way that avoids "the tendencies of two (admittedly caricatured) extremes within media studies: on one hand, assuming that meaningful discourse is almost impossible within the existing mass media because of its unidirectional flow and emphasis on spectacle, and, on the other hand, fetishizing the power of the individual viewer to radically subvert the intended meaning of all mass media texts, resulting in unfettered, liberatory play."⁴⁵

The plays' enduring engagement in political life (again, in their *Fortleben* as translations and spectacles) positioned them within the schema of mass culture to potentially upset the hegemonic power of the spectacle. Adorno explains the "schema of mass culture" as the reduction of all human activity into mimesis, into the reproduction and repetition of meaningless images, rather than in the pursuit of truth, in order to maintain the systems of reproduction upon which modern capitalism is based.⁴⁶ By hiding their political critique within the guise of a form acceptable to the schema of mass culture, the insurgent spectacles worked to potentially

⁴⁴ Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," 12.

⁴⁵ Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 18.

⁴⁶ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 85, 89, 95.

reorganize (in other words, change the schema of) the aesthetic life of their audiences. The idea that the works continue to develop in their *Fortleben* is important to their political and historical significance, because they were not divorced from their origins as they appear on the 21st century American stage. The continued relevance of and reference to the works' histories undermined what Adorno sees as one of the goals of mass culture, which is to make all cultural products uncontroversial, ahistorical and easily consumable.⁴⁷ Instead, the insurgent spectacles incorporated their histories as marquee examples of classic political drama into their newest iteration as spectacles. As both theatrical spectacles and venerated, perhaps even fetishized, works of German literature, *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* existed in the public and journalistic consciousness in ways not shared by other progressive Broadway spectacles, like *Rent* or *Avenue Q*, or by typical productions of these plays, which are generally confined to university or small *avant-garde* venues. Instead, the insurgent spectacles avoided being relegated into either of these categories and employed a dialectic of laughter and seriousness, which, for Walter Benjamin, "is the agent of clearing and cleansing new territory [for, among other things, political development]" and which is also at work in Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque.⁴⁸

This dialectic of humor and seriousness was vital to the way these spectacles functioned. Yet their financial success and their success in avoiding the stigma of both Broadway musical and *avant-garde* theater was due in no small part to their canonical status and the robust *Fortleben* they continue to enjoy. The awareness of the texts' histories, by both producers and consumers, added valences of interpretation and significance, due largely to the perceived "gravitas" they possess due to their high cultural provenance, but also their historical tradition of

⁴⁷ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 76, 82.

⁴⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 12.

political criticism and subversion. These markers of status and controversy are missing from the insurgent spectacles' ahistorical and reactionary contemporaries. The insurgent spectacles took on the guise of many of the other contemporary products of mass culture: they were bright, flashy, titillating and distracting. However, they also invited criticism of both their subject matter and their means of production.

This nexus of spectacle and liberatory play is the main theoretical concern of this chapter: where and how the insurgent spectacle resists the schema of mass culture, and how that resistance accomplished political goals. The insurgent spectacles, and the need within culture to resist homogenization and economic exploitation, can be traced back to the commercialization and wide-spread appeal of both the cinema and large-scale human spectacle (the circus, shows like the Tiller Girls, sport, etc.) The rise of industrialization and mechanical reproduction of goods saw a concomitant rise in the mass production of culture, and the need to entertain the masses of people being deployed to run the machinery of modern capitalism. The blockbuster movie, the TV sitcom, and the televised sporting event are all products of this system of cultural production, and all of these spectacles have their own political and ideological schema. In the writings of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Siegfried Kracauer, Alexander Kluge and Guy Debord, among others, the need for and conditions of the kind of spectacle (the insurgent spectacle) that can stand up to the manipulation and power of other more established forms of mass culture become clear.

The Insurgent Spectacle and the Frankfurt School: The “Circus” of Art and Political Crisis

The ways mass culture subverts art and literature to its schema are not always obvious. So-called great works of art, music, and poetry, among other forms, can still fall prey to the

stultifying influence of mass culture, according to Adorno. He writes, “A great poet is almost as good as a great inventor or talent scout, just as long as the standing of the work protects us from having to read any of it.”⁴⁹ He echoes this claim again in *Philosophy of New Music*, which according to Adorno is itself “an extended excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*” when he writes: “since the culture industry has trained its victims to avoid all effort in the leisure hours allotted them for cultural consumption, they cling all the more obstinately to the appearances that conceal the essence [of “authentic” art].”⁵⁰ He then holds up Schoenberg as an example of “new” music that potentially undoes what he argues is the hegemonic strangle hold that mass culture holds over the masses. Here, Adorno exposes the schizophrenic behavior symptomatic of much of mass cultural consumption. He succinctly aligns the artist—the great artist—with the other producers of vacuous mass spectacle and technological marvels. However, he provides a caveat: the poet is useful as long as the audience doesn’t have to “read” it.

What the insurgent spectacles did was precisely that: they provided the stimulus to potentially drive the audience out of their familiarity and comfort and force them to “read” the work. After Adorno, I maintain that the insurgent spectacles were successful because “we are not required to bring standards with us [;] we are enabled to treat and discuss the subject as it actually is in itself,” and, furthermore, that these spectacles helped expose “the reality of the hopelessly alienated for which the ‘thing-itself’ scarcely speaks any longer.”⁵¹ The insurgent spectacles could not and did not rely purely on shock, on sex and violence to whip audiences into paying attention. They artfully unmasked the conditions in which the subjects of America’s 24 hour news cycle and the consumers of its commodities exist. Indeed, Adorno foresees the

⁴⁹ Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 65.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 5, 12.

⁵¹ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 24-5.

tendency in mass spectacle to conflate human misery with entertainment, lamenting that we “can no longer distinguish how far the horrors narrated in [classic literature] serve the denunciation of society as opposed to the amusement of those who do not yet have the Roman circuses they are really waiting for.”⁵²

I take the “subject” here to be the fetishized art object, both the “original” and its representation, and I contend that it is alienated from mass cultural audiences by consumption of said mass culture. The poor, the disenfranchised, war victims and their perpetrators, criminals, the deviant, the insane, the capitalist and the wage slave, the “horrors” of classical literature are all “hopelessly alienated” from audiences by their means of representation. What the insurgent spectacles did—and what writing about them does—is represent that subject in a new way, and in so doing simultaneously unmasks the alienating effects of a wide spectrum of 21st century Americans’ mass cultural consumption, in large part by implicating the audience in the action and politics of the play, through technical methods that will be discussed in detail below. This is an important task, because even Brecht recognized in 1936 the difficulty in parsing what is natural from what is constructed, artificial.⁵³ Georg Lukács also articulates the notion of “second nature,” or that which is not natural but which capitalism manipulates to seem natural and incontestable.⁵⁴ The task of alienation then is not only one of the Epic Theater (as against the “profane” Broadway show, still haunted with residual cultish aspects), but also one dedicated to fighting cultural and historical repression and oppression.⁵⁵ The analogy to insurgency and the insurgent is especially powerful because it draws on the collective imagery Americans and Western Europeans have developed, after more than a decade of campaigning in Iraq and

⁵² Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 68.

⁵³ Brecht, *Schriften*, 2:1:211.

⁵⁴ Lukacs, “Consciousness of the Proletariat,” 86.

⁵⁵ Brecht, *Schriften*, 212-13.

Afghanistan, to represent things feared, unseen, and intractable. The insurgent is the farmer with a Kalashnikov rifle who upsets and unbalances the might of U.S. imperialism. Insurgency is hard to identify, difficult to contain, and (practically) impossible to eradicate. For those reasons, the insurgent spectacle is aptly named because it worked within the boundaries of “hopelessly alienating” mass culture, but did violence to it. It was potentially liberatory and actually subversive.

While the “War on Terror,” the “War on Drugs,” and any number of other reified campaigns of institutional violence may appear, on MSNBC and Fox News, as a kind of Roman circus, bloodbaths and personal traumas for mass entertainment, the actual events are both completely banal and truly horrifying. *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* were certainly not Roman circuses per-se (in that no one is actually killed to satisfy the mob’s blood-lust), but they did all retain elements of the circus. Furthermore, they represented and reflected on real social and physical traumas, and they did so in part through the “arena” of the stage and the bodies of both their characters and actors to accomplish their feats of entertainment. These productions represented suffering and horror in such a way that the audience was both entertained and encouraged to critically examine the sources of that same suffering and horror.

The insurgent spectacles also undermined another tenet of what Adorno sees as the assumptions the spectacle makes about its audience. He writes, “The viewer is supposed to be as incapable of looking suffering in the eye as he is of exercising thought. However, even more essential than transparent affirmation is the pre-determined resolution in the ‘happy ending’ of every tension whose purely apparent character is revealed by the ritual conclusion.”⁵⁶ These three spectacles left audiences with anything but a happy ending. There is very little catharsis to

⁵⁶ Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 69.

be found in these dramas. There is death, loneliness, emptiness, meaninglessness, but not catharsis. There is no denouement. The plays end much as they begin: nothing is resolved; nothing, really, has changed. The refrain of the eponymous song in Sater's production of *Spring Awakening* rings true for all of the players in these spectacles: they are "totally fucked."⁵⁷

The purposelessness of both the main figures' plights and their responses to it was a major component of all of these spectacles. Adorno specifically addresses the seeming purposelessness of some spectacles when he agrees with *Frühlings Erwachen* author Frank Wedekind when, in *The Culture Industry*, he indicates that the mass spectacle has positive elements "which bring it close to the circus, in the self-justifying and nonsensical [physical] skill" of the actors.⁵⁸ This self-justifying skill is brought to bear "in defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art."⁵⁹ The mode of "variety," of which Wedekind and Charlie Chaplin (among others) were such proponents, found its expression in the physicality of the actors and the interruption of action with songs. These aspects, in turn, commented on the past and future "action" of plays without a 'happy ending' or ritual conclusion, as such. In addition, there was a variety of action on stage—singing, dancing, acrobatics—which, unlike in a film, did not force the audience's gaze toward any one aspect of the spectacle. As Adorno notes, the novel (and subversive) aspects of the variety show were the continual betrayal of expectation and the irrelevance of temporal order. While these productions failed to meet this last *avant-garde* standard, in that they followed a narrative arc that cannot be picked up at any given point, as could a carnival show, their betrayal of the audience's expectations of what musical theater

⁵⁷ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 52.

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 114, and "Schema of Mass Culture," 71.

⁵⁹ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 114 and Wedekind, *Gesammelte Werke*, 9:426.

should be engaged the audiences in ways beyond those which Adorno ascribes to the reified products of mass culture.⁶⁰

The elements of the carnival and the circus which Adorno finds liberating are in many ways similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, and the insurgent spectacles employed this concept to significant effect across their aesthetic spectrums: dramatically, musically, and structurally. Cultural theorist Esther Peeren's recent work on Bakhtin serves as a model for the ways in which the carnivalesque in popular culture acts as a liberatory agent.⁶¹ Peeren argues that carnival, "within its own spatiotemporal boundaries," is a political and subversive force, but specifically (and only) in opposition to official culture, not in relationship to it. However, Bakhtin theorized the carnivalesque as an aestheticization of carnival and a decentralizing force, which separates (and liberates) the political and liberatory power of the carnival from its "historical, social, and institutional coordinates."⁶² Rather than be instrumental to the schema of mass culture, Bakhtin's concepts, and Peeren's work, are collaborators in the scheme of the insurgent spectacle. Again, the imagery and language of armed conflict are useful in describing the insurgent spectacle's role, in part because many of the theories that support it (from Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht, Bakhtin himself, etc.) have the historical valence of being developed under considerable political duress.

While Peeren's writings are more concerned with the political role and power of mass culture in general, Adorno specifically addresses the effects that mass culture has on the theater. He holds up Brecht's Epic Theater as an example of what theater that attempts to combat the homogenizing effects of commercial cinema can look like. Specifically, "Epic Theater is both a

⁶⁰ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 70-5.

⁶¹ Peeren, *Intersubjectivities*, 174-75.

⁶² Peeren, *Intersubjectivities*, 174-75.

response to mass culture and mass culture's own reversed consciousness of itself."⁶³ Though this certainly applied to the insurgent spectacle, this mode cannot be entirely subsumed under the concept of Epic Theater, but it does meet some of the requirements that Walter Benjamin, in particular, outlines in his essay on Brecht's Epic Theater. Like Epic Theater, the insurgent spectacles required a relaxed public that, nevertheless, thought and engaged with the "political will" of the performance.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the insurgent spectacles made use of alienation effects and contained instructive elements designed to unsettle the audience by reminding them of the illusory aspects of mass culture.⁶⁵

The insurgent spectacles, in form and content, betrayed what Adorno reads as the spectacle's *modus operandi*. In presenting these dramatic classics under the guise of the Broadway musical spectacle, their producers failed to "instruct" audience members "about the event [they are] about to witness and the powers that have staged it," and, in a break with the tradition of mass culture, allowed the audience to "participate in the work itself." Adorno argues that even great historical works of art are re-framed in such a way that the audience is pre-conditioned in how they should be viewed and accepted, so that the experience of that work only reinforces bourgeois ideology, insofar as the "experience" is merely a reinforcement and repetition of "mass culture itself," where all "genuine experience of art is devalued to a matter of evaluation."⁶⁶ Because these works failed to meet audience expectations, these audiences experienced the work in the moments when they were shocked into attentiveness. At critical moments, these shock experiences deviated from a prescribed and, according to Adorno, ideological norm. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno enumerates some genres of artworks wherein

⁶³ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 70.

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Was ist das epische Theater?," 532.

⁶⁵ Benjamin, "Was ist das epische Theater?," 535, 537.

⁶⁶ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 81.

“corrective” alienation, which opposes manipulative mass cultural objects, is at work: “art genres that fall below approved culture, such as circus tableaux and reviews, and probably mechanisms such as the water fountains of the seventeenth century, confess to what authentic artworks conceal in themselves as their secret a priori.”⁶⁷ The spontaneity and alienating shock of the artwork is, for Adorno, its essence, the moment when the dialectic of myth and enlightenment appears to the viewer. He finds that circus-like “emancipation” in Wedekind, particularly.⁶⁸ Those moments of apparent synthesis are what elevate “authentic” art above the “husks” produced by mass culture:

That instant—which is what artworks are—crystallized, at least in traditional works, at the point where out of their particular elements they became a totality. The pregnant moment of their objectivation is the moment that concentrates them as appearance, which is by no means just the expressive elements that are dispersed over the artworks. Artworks surpass the world of things by what is thing-like in them, their artificial objectivation. They become eloquent by the force of the kindling of thing and appearance. They are things whose power it is to appear.⁶⁹

One defining feature of the insurgent spectacles is that they were peppered with these “mechanisms” and alienating moments, which allowed the spectacle to cast off or at least challenge the most prevalent and stultifying schema of mass culture. The critical journalistic judgments that follow the productions are a rich resource for examining this cultural-critical apparatus. The liberatory aspects of the insurgent spectacles appeared in these instances of mass culture commenting on itself. Even more useful, however, for a discussion of this type of mass culture, are critical discussions not only of “how” the productions function and “what” they represent or discuss (quotations around the interrogative appear in Adorno’s essay, as well), but then “why” they appear the way that they do. Adorno offers, again from *Aesthetic Theory*, a

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 80.

⁶⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 81.

⁶⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. 80.

partial and “enigmatic” answer: “At the highest level of form the detested circus act is reenacted: the defeat of gravity, the manifest absurdity of the circus—Why all the effort?—is *in nuce* the aesthetic enigma.”⁷⁰ So, why all this effort? I contend that, at least in part, the exertion maintains a balance between the prerogatives of the schema of mass culture and those of its consumers. The insurgent spectacles were firmly on the side of the consumer.

The Risks of Art: The Insurgent Spectacle and the Culture Industry

The insurgent spectacles waged a type of guerrilla war against the kind often produced by Hollywood and broadcast television. According to Adorno, the stakes of consuming and adhering to that mode of mass culture are thus:

anyone who is incapable of talking in the prescribed fashion, that is of effortlessly reproducing formulas, conventions and judgments of mass culture as if they were his own, is threatened in his very existence, suspected of being an idiot or an intellectual. Looking good, make-up, the desperately strained smile of eternal youth which only cracks momentarily in the angry twitching of the wrinkles of the brow, all this bounty is dispensed by the personnel manager under threat of the stick. People give their approval to mass culture because they know or suspect that this is where they are taught the mores they will surely need as their passport in a monopolized life. This passport is only valid if paid for in blood, with the surrender of life as a whole and the impassioned obedience to a hated compulsion.⁷¹

Adorno makes a damning judgment of the conditions in which monopolized corporate media have put the consumer. He does not, however, despair. Yes, he argues that if the consumer does not accept and conform to the images presented to him by mass culture, there are real physical and social consequences, but within this argument he creates a place for the outlaw, even the insurgent. The metaphor of the “passport” gives to the sphere of mass culture the geopolitical aspect in which the insurgent spectacle was most effective. Adorno indicates that the

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 185-6.

⁷¹ Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 92.

struggle taking place within mass culture is one of life and death, and non-conformity puts both the consumer and the work of art in danger. Especially for one “suspected of being [...] an intellectual,” the insurgent spectacle was a welcome refuge, a safe house, in the hostile territory of “monopolized life.” The tension between the various modes of spectacle and the divergent political goals they pursue, and not “the supposed ‘stultification’ of the masses which is promoted by their enemies and lamented by their philanthropic friends,” is the crux on which the weight of mass culture hinges.⁷² The recent productions of *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* carved out a space within the sphere of mass culture that allowed for a wider array of political engagement than existed before for post-9/11 Broadway theater-goers. Audiences, according to Adorno, wait “for the day when the spell will be broken, and perhaps ultimately it is only this well concealed hope which draws people” into the spectacular arenas.⁷³ While Adorno seems despondent at the prospect of this hope being fulfilled, the insurgent spectacles renewed that hope, because they did draw back the veil—to varying extents and in different ways—that other cultural products throw over the eyes of their audiences.

According to Adorno, the draw of the spectacle, of the film star and (though not mentioned in Adorno’s writings) the rock star (several of whom appear onstage in *Woyzeck* and *Mother Courage*) is the masses’ desire both to be controlled, that is, to submit to the systems of control forced upon them, and to feel some closeness to the figures (the stars) they see as independent from it: “Mimesis explains the enigmatically empty ecstasy of the fans in mass culture... Participation in mass culture itself stands under the sign of terror. Enthusiasm not merely betrays an unconscious eagerness to read the commands from above but already reveals the fear of disobedience, of those unconventional desires from the suspicion of which the sex

⁷² Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 92.

⁷³ Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 95.

murderer who kills his own beloved passionately strives to cleanse himself.”⁷⁴ This dialectic, argues Adorno, is responsible for the way masses of fans behave in the presence of their stars, and the consumption of blockbuster films and tabloid journalism that fuels the star economy. Despite his apparent pessimism, however, Adorno does see a potential way out of the “empty ecstasy” that signifies so much of mass cultural consumption: “The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from the earth. It depends on human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it.”⁷⁵ The emphasis on belief, that is, on the perception of the power and role of mass culture in political life, is where “The Schema of Mass Culture” shows its liberatory potential. The pessimism of which critics so often accuse Adorno extends only so far as the lengths to which people will go to continue to be manipulated, or not. Even though Thomas Levin claims that Adorno and Horkheimer “see only the bleak prospects of historical regression,” they seem to share at least some of Siegfried Kracauer’s hope for mass culture. Kracauer remained convinced of the liberatory potential of mass culture, unlike some of his Frankfurt School colleagues who maintained “that only autonomous art offered the sole remaining preserve of the enlightenment project [of the liberation from illusion, myth, and mass deception].”⁷⁶ As is clear from the selection and analysis of Adorno’s writings above, he posits, too, that progressive possibility is latent in mass culture, if audiences and producers are able and willing to undermine the power of the system(s) to which they are subject.

⁷⁴ Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 96.

⁷⁵ Adorno, “Schema of Mass Culture,” 96.

⁷⁶ Levin, introduction, 19.

The Insurgent Spectacle in Everyday Life

Levin does find that progressive possibility unequivocally expressed in the writings of Siegfried Kracauer. Of course, Kracauer was writing in Weimar Germany, and had not witnessed the horror and depravity of the Second World War, unlike the Adorno and Horkheimer of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but Kracauer's concepts of art and its sustaining role both in mass culture and the enlightenment project are fundamental to the power and potential of the insurgent spectacle. As Kracauer himself notes, "Today, access to truth is by way of the profane."⁷⁷ While this claim has many potential applications, Kracauer focused much of his philosophical writings on the quotidian facets of mass culture to find the ruptures within its scheme, rather than on grand events. To wit, Kracauer contends that "We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is the major events which have the most decisive influence on us. We are much more deeply and continuously influenced by the tiny catastrophes that make up daily life."⁷⁸ These "tiny catastrophes" were the subjects of the insurgent spectacles. By representing and commenting on the indignities and injustices which consumers of mass culture experience every day, the insurgent spectacles encouraged, rather than retarded, social and political awareness. Levin supports this reading, writing that "Kracauer observes (recasting the then-prevalent juxtaposition of the politically concerned journalist and the more indulgently autonomous 'writer'), 'the traditional responsibility of the journalist has begun to fall more and more to 'a new type of writer' [who], instead of being contemplative, are political; instead of seeking the universal beyond the particular, they find it in the very workings of the particular; instead of pursuing developments, they seek ruptures."⁷⁹ Like Kracauer, this dissertation in particular and the

⁷⁷ Levin, introduction, 1.

⁷⁸ Levin, introduction, 5.

⁷⁹ Levin, introduction, 9.

insurgent spectacle in general “focus on the impoverished but potentially revelatory landscape of daily life.”⁸⁰ *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* used the “impoverished” circumstances (the spiritual of the middle class and the physical of the poor) of their dramatic subjects to draw attention to those of their viewers, and thereby showed the “ruptures” in the prevailing view of culture proffered by other forms of mass media and spectacle.

It is “the drama of enlightenment—the wavering between Utopian possibility and apocalyptic threat” that informs the structure of *The Mass Ornament* and indeed provides the tension found in modern mass spectacles, which, according to Kracauer, are “the aesthetic reflex of a rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.”⁸¹ The insurgent spectacles were part of that aesthetic reflex, but rather than distract and oppress the masses that witnessed them, as with the “vast stadium spectacles” with which Kracauer engages, they indicated the consequences of that “rational” (*Ratio*) economic system and entreated viewers to use reason (*Vernunft*) to critique and, ultimately, change the cultural system of which they are a part.⁸² There is always a danger when deploying Marxist critiques of mass culture that the spectacle becomes simply a superstructural reflection of the prevailing condition of the masses. Both Kracauer and the insurgent spectacles offered the possibility to transform the spectacle into a product of mass culture with progressive potential that “expose the gulf between capitalist *Ratio* and reason.”⁸³ The liberatory potential of the insurgent spectacle is similar to the hope Kracauer finds for both mass culture and the enlightenment project in the form of the mass ornament. “Kracauer locates the emancipatory potential of a distracted mode of reception in its capacity to retool perceptual and motor skills for the new sensorial economy of modernity, whose most

⁸⁰ Levin, introduction, 14.

⁸¹ Levin, introduction, 17.

⁸² Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 85-6.

⁸³ Levin, introduction, 18.

salient characteristics are its speed and abrupt transitions.”⁸⁴ Kracauer has the cinema in mind when he makes this claim, but it can be applied to other media, as well. The insurgent spectacle accomplished this through a variety of means, including abrupt changes in scene and lighting, and musical and physical elements that stretch the label of the spectacles as theatrical. The “distracted mode of reception” and its application in the theater are tools that the insurgent spectacle used to further the project of enlightenment.

The project of enlightenment, Kracauer contends, “leads directly through the center of the mass ornament, not away from it.”⁸⁵ The insurgent spectacle was not a total rebellion against or escape from the trappings of neoliberal or reactionary spectacles. Like the mass ornament, the insurgent spectacles and the study of them offer the potential to reorganize the schema of mass culture to be less an instrument of capital and more a tool of enlightenment. The gulf between capitalist rationality and human reason is a social and political concern in contemporary America, just as it was for Kracauer in Weimar Germany. The reason with which Kracauer approached the analysis of his contemporary spectacles continues to be a vital tool both in analyzing the reactionary spectacles which are ubiquitous in 21st century American media and in establishing new forms of art and entertainment to balance them in our broader political life.

The Insurgent Spectacle in Cinema: Politics Outside the Theater

The tension between market forces and human reason and well-being is constantly present in the writings of Kracauer, Adorno, and Brecht. Author and filmmaker Alexander Kluge has spent a career applying techniques that reveal that tension to the cinema and the small screen

⁸⁴ Levin, introduction, 26.

⁸⁵ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 86.

to resist “the industrialization of consciousness” by new media technologies.⁸⁶ Kluge pioneered the practice of making popular, economically viable, liberatory art in spite of the market pressures to conform to the formulae of spectacle and consumption popular both in Hollywood and West Germany. Particularly with his film *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1978), Kluge pushed the boundaries of his medium against the prevailing attitudes of those in charge of commercial film distribution. In similar fashion, the successes of *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage and her Children* open the arena of Broadway Theater to a wider array of aesthetic and political possibilities. Of further interest to the program of the insurgent spectacles is his 1968 film *Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: Ratlos* (*Artists under the Big Top: Perplexed*) both because of their content and the effects they had in the development of their medium.

With *Artists under the Big Top: Perplexed*, Kluge shows that circus-like displays, and audience analysis of them, are effective cultural critical tools. He finds them applicable even in the realm of cinema, both because they are “refreshing,”⁸⁷ but also because the milieu of the circus, as compared to and contrasted with those of television and everyday life, allow the audience “not to identify with the protagonist, but to watch her critically. The spectator becomes detached from the story world—in Brecht’s terms, distanced or alienated.”⁸⁸ Even though the insurgent spectacles were pieces of theater, like Kluge’s films, they shared little resemblance either to Aristotelian drama or Epic Theater.

In *Germany in Autumn*, Kluge, in collaboration with Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Edgar Reitz and Volker Schlöndorff, critiques Germany’s past and present by blending fact and fiction

⁸⁶ Langston, *Visions of Violence*, 195.

⁸⁷ Lutze, *Alexander Kluge*, 158.

⁸⁸ Lutze, *Alexander Kluge*, 71.

into a series of vignettes that—in part—document, comment upon, and show the effects of the activities of the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), a German domestic left-wing terror organization. These vignettes, while they do not have a plot, per se, convey a mood or impression about both the events they portray and the historical context in which the directors made the film. Furthermore, *Germany in Autumn*, like the insurgent spectacles, bucked the market expectations for a successful product. Kluge argued that the market “requirements do not necessarily reflect the internal demands of the material nor the interests of the viewer.”⁸⁹ In similar fashion, the successes of *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage and her Children* opened the arena of Broadway Theater to a wider array of aesthetic and political possibilities.

Kluge does not rely solely on film and television as the media of his cultural critique. Opposition to the spectacle of modern mass media can take many forms. Anachronistic media (one of which the theater is more and more becoming), argues Kluge, are useful in upsetting the “substance of mediated consciousness,” and in so doing, possibly call it into question.⁹⁰ In a 2011 interview by Angelos Koutsourakis for the journal *Film-Philosophy*, Kluge talks about the Brechtian (and Benjaminian) task of politicizing art in order to expose the ideological qualities of everyday life.

Koutsourakis draws a parallel between Brecht’s and Benjamin’s thinking and the political and social roles of the insurgent spectacles when he says of Kluge: “you suggest that in order to politicise art one needs to reveal the political aspects of life that we do not perceive as political. Brecht suggested something similar, when he argued that emotions and feelings are not universal but political per se.” Kluge responds: “By touching form and politics it can be political and by touching an explicit political subject it might be private. Elements of organised policy are hidden

⁸⁹ Lutze, *Alexander Kluge*, 78.

⁹⁰ Langston, *Visions of Violence*, 195.

in our personal lives. Then again, organised policy is only part of the society's political life."⁹¹ By making explicit the relationship between art and politics, Kluge reveals how the insurgent spectacle participates in political life. By engaging current political hot button topics in an unexpected aesthetic form, the insurgent spectacle reveals not only the politics of spectacle (in all forms), but the ways in which previously unrealized areas of the audiences' lives are also political. The producers of these spectacles used the content of the respectable, high-art "other" of revolutionary German drama within this 21st century American pop-culture milieu to smuggle their politics into an acceptable form of middle-class theater consumption. The application of Brechtian techniques to the cinema is not unique to Kluge, but he provides a clear and deliberate example of a producer of mass culture intentionally subverting the general trend of a mass medium to distract and manipulate. Using Brechtian techniques, despite their clear progressive intent, is not without risks.

Koutsourakis plays devil's advocate and asks Kluge to defend his use of Brechtian techniques: "'to use Brecht without criticising him means to betray him'. In what ways can we use Brecht [...] without betraying him?" Kluge takes up the challenge, saying:

Of course we have to criticise him, you have to criticise me too. This is the correct attitude that one has to criticise everybody, that's something that Brecht says too. But on the other hand it is too 'elegant' for me. In a world where Brecht is neglected, I do not think that we have to criticise him. [...] However, at the moment I think that it is necessary to bring Brecht back to the society and place him into our contemporary reality. There is no necessity to criticise somebody relatively unknown and absent from the media and from television.⁹²

Reacting to a cultural landscape dominated by spectacles of sport, politics, and violence, in which viable critical tools are largely absent from mass media forums, Kluge argues that it is of greater value to use Brecht's ideas because they are largely absent. The tension between

⁹¹ Kluge, "Brecht Today," 224

⁹² Kluge, "Brecht Today," 225.

criticism and popularity is obvious in this section of the interview. The need to be popular to effect change supersedes the need to be critical of the methods used in the creation of political art. According to Kluge, only after these Brechtian techniques gain a measure of popularity does it make sense to begin criticizing them. Instead, those techniques should be deployed to criticize prevailing political and aesthetic attitudes, as well as the people who promote them. Criticizing these figures and attitudes, especially through art, serves a dual purpose: first, the direct advantage of drawing attention to the failings of public figures or the human consequences of spectacular public events (like war or financial collapse), and second, by drawing attention to the critical role that art, that the insurgent spectacle, can serve.

What Kluge finds useful and liberatory in Brecht's thinking is what he fears in late 20th and early 21st century media, namely that they precipitate "pandemic inattention, [mobilize] passivity, and [splinter] subjectivity."⁹³ The insurgent spectacle worked against these by now well-established hallmarks of mass media in part by drawing attention to the "different orders of time at work within everyday experience," which the new media "collapse."⁹⁴ The time in the theater is a *Zeitkunstwerk*, a "work of art of time" just as any other product of mass media, but the insurgent spectacle makes use of "historical" and "psychological" time both in its subject matter and in its still erstwhile sacred and political location in the theater.⁹⁵ The heterogeneity of the insurgent spectacle was one of its defenses against the homogenizing tendencies of the schema of mass culture.

Kluge sees the "paying public" as part of a cultural machine.⁹⁶ He writes, "This machine wasn't new. It consists of an entrance (portal), a box office where the entrance money is paid, an

⁹³ Langston, *Visions of Violence*, 195.

⁹⁴ Langston, *Visions of Violence*, 195.

⁹⁵ Langston, *Visions of Violence*, 196.

⁹⁶ Kluge, *Cinema Stories*, 2.

exit, an auditorium (as in a theater), and a public. This had always been the principle of opera, theater, fairs, collections of curios, panoramas, world exhibitions, and the circus.”⁹⁷ Kluge finds in the history of cinema (which for him is also a history of fantastic spectacle) an indication that the “paying public” is “less interested in its own present—which is the cause of suffering, which resists—than in the permanent expansion of its fantasies in the direction of the unexpected. For the new that does not resist desire.”⁹⁸ The insurgent spectacles confronted their audiences precisely with their present suffering, and they went further to indicate that suffering’s historical or structural sources.

Funding the Insurgency: Making Progressive Politics Profitable

The dissimilarity between the insurgent spectacles and other forms of musical spectacle, on Broadway and television alike, was the ideological and contemplative space within which these particular productions revealed themselves. These productions did not fit traditional notions of spectacle, musical, or drama—they rather alloyed the three forms into something apart—and yet they remained popular and profitable, particularly in the case of *Spring Awakening*. The confluence of commercial success and sharp (and more importantly, critically well-received) social criticism is anomalous in terms of the spectacle in general and on Broadway, specifically. Their openly progressive messages further complicated their success because they raised audience awareness about specific political issues and simultaneously provided distraction from any potential moral or political outrage at what they represent on stage. In this way, even the manifest political content of the spectacles could become simply a commodity for audience members who may have disagreed with the plays’ message, even as

⁹⁷ Kluge, *Cinema Stories*, 3.

⁹⁸ Kluge, *Cinema Stories*, 7, 14-15.

audience members who were open to the spectacles' politics had authentic political experiences. The spectacles' journalistic criticism supports this reading of their heterogeneous nature, and shows that the commodification of political and social critique, even dissent, does not always nullify the productions' political force. The social self-image of America in the early 21st century nascent in these productions and the identity of the dramas themselves become clear by tracing their development from texts, through their historical and contemporary critical reception, to the particular instances of their spectacularity.

The stars' photos on the Broadway placards, the play-as-event (in other words, a place for audiences to experience the stars "in the flesh"), the co-option of theater culture for television and vice-versa (*High School Musical* (2006) and *Glee* (2009)) are part and parcel of the industry of spectacle. "Spectacular commodities of this type could obviously not exist were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody,"⁹⁹ claims Guy Debord. Audiences seem to require the spectacle to rouse them from their torpor of distraction. They pay to be titillated, morally outraged, and entertained because, after Debord, the 24-hour news cycle and continuous consumer pressure numb audiences to the physical consequences of their cultural ideologies. That spectacles like *Spring Awakening* confronted audiences with those consequences *as well as* entertain them separates them from the bulk of other musicals, either on Broadway or the successor televised serial spectacles.

Analyzing why audiences attend the shows and what political attitudes they embrace is impossible without extensive social scientific research. But we can analyze the critical response to the spectacles they viewed and in which they participated, the political criticism or attitudes in the texts, and the critical and spectacular natures of the productions, by reading historical and

⁹⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 111-2

contemporary criticism of the play, and using that reading to inform an analysis of the text and the site of the production. Together, these components help define the nature of this new kind of spectacle and the future role of the Broadway spectacle as mass culture. Where *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage and her Children* differed from other mass spectacle is in their relationship both to history and contemporary social and political events and upheavals.

Debord maintains that “the spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history found in historical time, is in effect a *false consciousness of time*.”¹⁰⁰ This statement is, in broad respects, true, but beyond commercial interests, these productions aimed precisely to expose the paralyzed, blind, or reactionary parts of 21st century American political and social life (which are not ahistorical or arbitrary givens), while simultaneously serving as marketable entertainment. Again, it is impossible to say if each and every audience member (or any more than those for which critical responses exist) responded to this intent in a “real” political way—that is to say, if attending the show changed or motivated subsequent public and political behavior. What these spectacles did, however, was encourage audiences to reflect on the history of the spectacle they were viewing as well as the history of the social and political issues with which the spectacle engaged. They did so by drawing attention to the texts’ (often) politically and socially subversive nature through the performance and, as with *Spring Awakening* and *Mother Courage*, maintaining the setting of the German originals, which kept the history present in the production. While this may in fact reflect Debord’s “false consciousness of time” in the sense that the setting is without its other historical markers, the insistence on the value of the “other,” the 19th century German experience, in

¹⁰⁰ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 114.

revealing and solving 21st century American problems is an innovative and politically progressive position to hold for Broadway spectacle. This is yet another example of how the insurgent spectacles adopted the tactics of Brechtian Theater to raise its audiences' awareness of their own historical and material conditions.

Another historical theatrical aspect present in all three of these works is how they stage relationships to mortality, which they portray both on stage (though rarely) and off. On the American stage, there is an historical and ideological aversion to the presence of and confrontation with death and dying, particularly if that death or dying is their own. As Jonathan Chambers notes, "The prospect of death thus loomed as a great, disquieting prospect that was to be avoided at all costs."¹⁰¹ Historically, death on the stage remains for the most part hidden, but it is also very much present, which leads to the modern American attitude toward death: "Because death is [seen as] failure, it does not exist. And yet, it is everywhere."¹⁰² In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the stage became a place to "deal with humanity's preoccupation with two occurrences basic to human existence: sex and death."¹⁰³ In all of the insurgent spectacles, death appears alternately as meaningless, as escape, as failure, as moral consequence, and as part of inexorable economic and bio-political processes. Sex, too, takes on these various roles, with the added dimension of making these processes and mortal (and moral) decisions erotic.

In addition to portraying homosexuality, *Spring Awakening* also "queers" the theater, that is, it reacts against what some scholars claim is realism's conservatism. It does so by championing post-modernist styles and genres that refuse to observe "the conventions of fourth-

¹⁰¹ Chambers, "Or I'll Die," 170-1.

¹⁰² Chambers, "Or I'll Die," 169.

¹⁰³ Chambers, "Or I'll Die," 171.

wall domesticity.”¹⁰⁴ Characters comment on themselves and the action of the plot in such a way that they reveal the apparatus of performance—the lights, set, costumes, props, the architecture of the theater, and so on, again taking a cue from Brecht’s epic theater. *Spring Awakening*’s audiences could see the lighting instruments; the company built the set in such a way as to convince audiences of its un-reality; and the characters often directly address the audience, breaking the fourth wall and involving—or implicating—the audience in the action on stage.

The subversion of the traditional theatrical space invites criticism of the normative constructs and ideologies that are represented (and criticized) there.¹⁰⁵ Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s theory of the culture industry maintains that mass culture spectacles are designed to maintain the political status quo of capitalism by making cultural products banal so that they can be sold as quickly and ephemerally as material products.¹⁰⁶ Adorno saw the pleasure derived from pop music, for example, as being superficial and false and the listener as being nothing more than a slave to its catchy beats and simple melodies.¹⁰⁷ One of the dangers of the proliferation of this kind of mass media is that it supports the ruling classes by placating consumers with senseless entertainment fare and by presenting certain socially disruptive events (strikes, demonstrations, political rallies, etc.) with the “rhetoric of moral panic.”¹⁰⁸ These events are portrayed in the media, “not as healthy aspects of political dissent, but rather as crises of law and order.”¹⁰⁹ Typically, the media portray these “crises,” and manipulate public reaction to them, by accessing and highlighting the views of the primary actors and agencies involved in the crises—the police, the courts, and the politicians. The insurgent spectacle represented the sources

¹⁰⁴ Dolan, *Theater & Sexuality*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Dolan, *Theater and Sexuality*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 100.

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*.

¹⁰⁸ Danesi, *X-Rated*, 146.

¹⁰⁹ Danesi, *X-Rated*, 146.

of 21st century American political strife in a context that eschewed the “rhetoric of moral panic,” and instead allowed audiences to engage with the subjects (and, presumably, with one another) in non-confrontational and alternative ways than those offered by the news media, for instance.

Debord and Kracauer, among other Marxist theorists, believed that the consumption of mass culture led to a “false consciousness,” which means it is “the process by which the dominant ideology was able to naturalize aspects of how society is organized and this was achieved through the control of cultural practice.”¹¹⁰ Debord turns his Marxist analysis on the concept of “the spectacle” and makes this claim about the power of the public to influence politics and high culture: “Rebellious tendencies among the young generate a protest that is still tentative and amorphous, yet already clearly embodies a rejection of the specialized sphere of the old politics, as well as of art and everyday life.”¹¹¹ The nascent appeal of the insurgent spectacle can be located here, where the amorphous political will of the younger generation can be marshaled into avenues other than those of capitalist instrumentality. This new form of spectacle deployed the same tactics to empower their young audiences that neoliberal or reactionary spectacles use to drive consumption and encourage political apathy in theirs.

In the insurgent spectacles, the rebellious tendencies of the young manifested themselves as a rejection of the old Broadway spectacle, and a desire for mass culture that does more than distract or mollify. Debord maintains that this conflict between entertainment and political engagement is symptomatic of a wider cultural conflict. They are “two sides of the same coin, both signaling new spontaneous struggle emerging under the sign of *criminality*, both portents of a second proletarian onslaught on class society.”¹¹² In real political terms, the evidence of this

¹¹⁰ Downes and Miller, *Media Studies*, 25.

¹¹¹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 86.

¹¹² Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 86.

“criminality” and the State’s response to it are well documented, but criminality in art can simply mean being unconventional, or breaking with artistic tradition, for instance, giving Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* a punk-rock attitude and soundtrack; or turning *Woyzeck* into an erotic, acrobatic carnival with economic crisis as a backdrop; or yet again, playing Brecht’s *Mother Courage* earnestly, in full awareness of his precepts of epic theater, but give it a big budget, huge stars, a world-famous director, and play it for free in New York City at the height of America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What follows, Debord suggests, is that “the *enfants perdus* of this as-yet immobile horde enter once again upon the battlefield, which has changed yet stayed the same, a new General Ludd will be at their head—leading them this time in an onslaught on the *machinery of permitted consumption*.”¹¹³ The potential for political and social change is clearly present, both in the Debord’s analysis and the insurgent spectacle. Where Debord’s critique loses some of its power, and where these spectacles took theirs, is that this onslaught has yet to develop. Rather, the attack on the machinery is like that of an insurgency: unexpected, difficult to discover, and from within.

The Monkey Wrench of Theater and the Machine of Permitted Consumption

The accuracy or inevitability of Debord’s depiction of a cultural revolution is debatable, but it is clear that the onslaught on the “machinery of permitted consumption” is a viable theory, as audiences rewarded these Broadway spectacles with their money, and critics saw them for what they were: mass cultural—but not reactionary—theater. The major fault of the historical Marxist critique is its elitist undercurrents, whereby only the critics, and not the broader audience, can determine which artworks are ideologically compromised and which are not.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 86.

¹¹⁴ Dawnes and Miller, *Media Studies*, 25.

Furthermore, the more strict Marxist theories seem to assume, on the one hand, that audiences are “zombies” who are unaware that they are being manipulated; and, on the other, that members of the ruling class form a “monolithic” group, united in the cause of indoctrinating the masses to their collective will.¹¹⁵ This view grossly oversimplifies how modern societies work, where the diverse interests of different classes of people continually clash in media and pop culture representations. This Marxist critique “presupposes an audience as powerless dupes, with all constituents making the same reading.”¹¹⁶ Instead, conceiving of mass culture as a diverse and dynamic culture—and one in which audiences imbue works with their own political and intellectual attitudes—allows for the wide range of reactions to and attendees of the various modern spectacles to which we have access, from the stages of Broadway to the NASCAR Speedway.

That “the spectacle” is heterogeneous means there is room for different and even conflicting political agendas within the varieties of spectacle. I contend that *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* combat, for instance, the politics of the spectacle that is the “NASCAR Nation,” as Newman and Giardina see it, by undermining or refuting both prongs of the political Right that motivate and thrive from it: “paleo-conservatism” and “neo-conservatism.” “Paleo-conservatism” is often described as the “Old Right” and is typically focused on cultivating “the nation’s core social, moral, and cultural bedrocks—those rooted in traditionalist, European, Christian, patriarchal, heterofamilial, sometimes racist, anti-Federalist ideologies.”¹¹⁷ Russell Kirk famously summarized this particular brand of conservatism with his six “canons of conservatism”:

¹¹⁵ Danesi, *X-Rated*, 146.

¹¹⁶ Lough, “The Analysis of Popular Culture,” 219.

¹¹⁷ Newman and Giardina, *Sport, Spectacle and NASCAR Nation*, 48.

a belief in a transcendent order, based in tradition, divine revelation, or natural law;
an affection for the “variety and mystery” of human existence;
a conviction that society requires orders and classes that emphasize “natural distinctions”;
a belief that property and freedom are closely linked;
a faith in custom, convention, and prescription; and
a recognition that innovation must be tied to existing traditions and customs, which is a respect for the political value of prudence.¹¹⁸

Unlike its paleo-ideological sibling, neo-conservatism is typically associated with what critics have referred to as the state-fashioned “American empire building project.”¹¹⁹ The fundamental neo-conservative doctrines assume the United States’ preeminence in establishing global democracy and in overseeing the proliferation of Western liberal market economies.¹²⁰ Like their paleo-conservative counterparts, neo-conservatives generally prefer limited government involvement in domestic economic and social activities. However, unlike paleo-conservatives, neo-conservatives often look for substantial public outlay to strengthen militaristic capacities, more rigorously expand and enforce immigration laws, stimulate the flow of commerce in and out of domestic borders, and glorify individuality.¹²¹ Neo-conservatives further tend to be pro war (and war spending), against social welfare programs, and increasingly occupied with the Middle East and the threat to Israeli power in the region.¹²² These tendencies can be subsumed under the concept of neoliberalism, which is first and foremost

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an

¹¹⁸ Rusello, “Territorial Democracy,” 109.

¹¹⁹ See Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic (The American Empire Project)* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004) for a more thorough discussion of this.

¹²⁰ See Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996).

¹²¹ See Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” in *The Weekly Standard*, 8:47 (2003).

¹²² Newman and Giardina, *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation*, 53-4.

institutional framework appropriate to such practices [...] and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets.¹²³

These seemingly disparate elements “fused” and called for disparate conservative ideologues to “work together” to revive “traditional” norms of social conservatism, reestablish a free enterprise economy, refocus fundamentalist moral imperatives (such as abortion, creationism, and prayer in schools) into the national dialogue, grossly expand military spending and endeavor, and eradicate many of the “liberal” social welfare initiatives introduced during the New Deal and implemented during the civil rights era. What this analysis of the “NASCAR Nation” reveals, however, is that spectacles, neo-liberal or insurgent, can be both manipulative and participatory.¹²⁴ Audiences are not unwilling subjects of the ruling classes’ rhetorical and ideological influences. Rather, they are part and parcel of the spectacle; they provide both the “real” and political capital whereby the spectacle both represents and forms public will. In the same way, Broadway audiences are not totally subject to the ideologies of the spectacles they observe and in which they to varying degrees participate. The political and ideological programs set forth by these productions of *Spring Awakening*, *Woyzeck*, and *Mother Courage* both inform and project the attitudes of their audiences. By looking at the complex of factors (text, reception, production) that constitute the spectacle, its exact nature and effect become clearer.

I argue, here and in the chapters that follow, that the political program set forth by the insurgent spectacles was essentially progressive: it opposed neoliberal capitalism as practiced by Wall Street and multinational banks; it was inclusive of lifestyles and sexualities that are not Christian or hetero-normative; it was anti-war, and, in some ways, anarchic; it encouraged the

¹²³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

¹²⁴ Newman and Giardina, *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation*, 56-7. Newman and Giardina conduct an exhaustive and wide-ranging political and economic analysis of the particular spectacle that is NASCAR, but for my purposes, the mere existence of their study and the claims it makes about cultural products allow for analyses of other products that do not represent and further the specific ideologies they discuss.

education and empowerment of children, the poor, and the disenfranchised; it encouraged charity, conservation, and in form rather than content, the use and practice of art as a political and instructional tool. As collected and expressed above, these political goals and ideals are anathema to the blockbuster pyrotechnic melodrama and the Sunday spectacle of NASCAR Nation. Despite that, though, they were economically viable, which indicates that there is not only an audience for this art, but, in terms of Wall Street and Hollywood, that this market has the potential for growth. This last point is particularly important, because, again, the insurgent spectacle had only liberatory *potential*: they were constantly threatened, like a military insurgency, by destruction from larger external forces (in the case of the spectacle, from co-option into the large capitalist scheme) or collapse from within (like Gardarrson's subsequent spectacles, which relied on *Woyzeck*'s gimmickry, but lacked any discernible political content.) The insurgent spectacle was continually exposed to the violence of the schema of mass culture, and for that reason, these brief confrontations with mass culture's hegemonic power require inquiry and examination.

Chapter 2

The Kids Aren't Alright: Steven Sater's *Spring Awakening* as a Spectacle of Sex and Death

In 2006, *Spring Awakening* fired the first shots in the ideological insurgency against the neoliberal spectacle. It stands as the paradigm of the insurgent spectacle, to which *Woyzeck* and *Mother Courage* add nuance, when its economic success clearly signaled audiences' receptiveness to its innovative forms and controversial, subversive content. *Spring Awakening* deployed several formal innovations, and this chapter examines them as representative moments of the insurgent spectacle. These innovations function first on a temporal level. The production explicitly ruptures the diegetic space of the drama through a strategy its producers refer to as "historical juxtaposition."¹²⁵ These moments of rupture occur at those junctures in the drama that have historically received the most critical attention and provide Sater and Sheik the opportunities for their own sharp commentary.

These diegetic ruptures fulfill several programmatic and tactical functions. Primarily, they operate as alienation effects that manipulate the audience's expectations of the action on stage and influence their reaction to it. The ruptures also herald the 21st century rock concert that takes place synchronically with the drama. This concert-within-a-musical acts as the vehicle both for explicit expression of interiority, which is for the most part absent in *Frühlings Erwachen*, and as metacommentary on the action of the play. The concert becomes the metaphorical club with which the producers beat the message of the drama into the audience. Finally, these ruptures draw attention to the formal aspects of the theater: the organization of the set, the interior of the theater, and the technical apparatus. In these ways, *Spring Awakening* distinguishes itself from earlier adaptations of *Frühlings Erwachen*. Yet for all of its formal innovations, it still draws

¹²⁵ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 18.

heavily on dramatic tradition to use these innovative techniques in the places where they may most effectively promote a progressive political program.

The following reading of *Spring Awakening* as exemplary of the insurgent spectacle examines these diegetic ruptures in detail as they relate to its two central themes: sex and death. The spectacle takes on both of these themes, as they represent various forms of teen anxiety, first, through representations sex and sexuality in its many guises, and second through representations of mortality and existential crisis. In “The Bitch of Living,” the boys of *Spring Awakening* vent these anxieties under concert spotlights and to a rock soundtrack:

Moritz and the boys: It’s the bitch of living
With nothing but your hand.
Just the bitch of living
As someone you can’t stand. [...]
Melchior: It’s the bitch of living—
And living in your head.
It’s the bitch of living,
And sensing God is dead.¹²⁶

This reading shows how these breaks emphasize the dramatic, lyrical, and subversive messages of *Frühlings Erwachen*. In so doing, they both take advantage of and undermine the neoliberal spectacle, exemplified primarily in Broadway megamusicals, but also in ahistorical mass cultural narratives that champion order and growth. The chapter interrogates the moments of interiority and metacommentary in the Sater/Sheik production, notably the rock concert, and highlights their functions as dramatic sign posts, distractions, and vehicles of emotional manipulation, all of which serve the political strategies of the insurgent spectacle. The chapter opens this investigation by situating Sater and Sheik’s production historically, tracing its beginnings, and then analyzes the innovative and critical role that the theater—the physical and intellectual space—plays in the insurgent spectacle, focusing primarily on the ways the lighting

¹²⁶ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 24-5.

and sets help achieve the producers' aesthetic and political goals. The analyses of the moments of rupture are then broken into two parts, as is *Spring Awakening* itself. As a spectacle of sex and death, *Spring Awakening* divides into two acts that deal primarily with these dramatic phenomena in turn. This chapter examines the politics and innovative dramatic techniques of the productions, then shows how those are deployed in creating a spectacle devoted to the subjects of sex and death.

An Insurgent Manifesto: Historical Juxtaposition in *Spring Awakening*

Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's *Spring Awakening* began as little more than a shared desire to give voice to "rage and longing," to express "unheard yearnings and anxieties" through rock music, and Frank Wedekind's incisive text was an ideal vehicle for that.¹²⁷ The aspects of Wedekind's text that drew Sater and Sheik to it were "Wedekind's eccentricity, his odd humor, the caricaturing of adults. And then, of course, there is a decent amount of prurient shock value in there, which is always good." Sater continues that "Wedekind wrote something that is much darker and more fragmentary" than the play he, Sheik, and director Michael Mayer produced, but he maintains that both he and Wedekind share a primary concern, which was "to give this scabrous account of what was going on in society."¹²⁸

The three producers had originally wanted to adapt Wedekind's text into a setting more contemporary than late 19th century Germany, specifically, "early-'60s, post-McCarthy-era America, where society would be enveloped by another kind of really despicable, bourgeois conservatism."¹²⁹ However, the trio eventually decided to keep the 19th century German setting

¹²⁷ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 14, 16.

¹²⁸ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 16.

¹²⁹ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 17.

and the play's "moments of interiority" to showcase the contemporary music, "in an intentional, radical split from what was happening in the scenes."¹³⁰ This "historical juxtaposition" caused Sater and Sheik a great deal of anxiety, Sheik exclaiming that "the concept was precarious!"¹³¹ The fear of seeming "pretentious" or the production coming off as "just plain bad" reveals the pressure of aesthetic expectations and market forces already at work on the play, before they had even set pen to paper.¹³² Like *Rent* before it, *Spring Awakening*'s creators were worried not only about failure, but about the production being co-opted into the cycle of the culture industry, its style and subject matter reproduced *ad nauseam* in pursuit of profit.¹³³

The concept of historical juxtaposition is of primary importance to the Sater/Sheik production and this insurgent spectacle. *Frühlings Erwachen*'s history influences their *Spring Awakening* and the ways in which the same historical and progressive motifs and fundamental social concerns reveal themselves in this new spectacle. These historical juxtapositions manifest in the temporal and diegetic ruptures in the play, when the 21st century rock concert interrupts the 19th century drama, and repressed 19th century teens vent their frustrations through 21st century vulgarity and media. The most significant moments in Mayer's production occur when the actors pull the microphones from their period costumes and "just wail."¹³⁴ According to Mayer, "the truth is, they're [the singers] not even in character in those moments. They're just the actors being rock stars."¹³⁵ Essentially, there are two productions taking place on the same stage. The temporal ruptures when *Spring Awakening-the-play* morphs into *Spring Awakening-the-rock concert* are the moments when the 19th century play becomes the vehicle for

¹³⁰ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 17-8.

¹³¹ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 18.

¹³² Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 18.

¹³³ Kenrick, *Musical Theater*, 378.

¹³⁴ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 18.

¹³⁵ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 18.

contemporary cultural critique. The alienation effect of these jarring moments of rupture, when 19th century characters become 21st century rock stars, is an adaptation of a Brechtian model. Rather than watching and smoking, that is, watching with a certain degree of detachment, the audience is surprised, shocked into processing two different modes of expression. This overstimulation is designed to disguise political critique into the production as harmless entertainment. The songs “further the story but not the plot,” such as it is, insofar as they provide narrative material (*fabula*) but, as they are designed diegetically to occur simultaneously with the spoken action on stage, they do not develop the plot (*sjuzhet*).¹³⁶ By taking Wedekind’s *Frühlings Erwachen* as a starting point, the creative team ruled out many of the possibilities of classical or traditionally Broadway theater. Catharsis or a happy ending were never viable options. As a result, the aesthetic form and critical content of the work become the focus of any potential analysis as well as its selling point to audiences. The rock concert embedded in this political theater acts both as a distraction or relief from the emotional turmoil of the play and a spectacular expression of it.

Theater historian John Kenrick notes that with Mayer’s production, “*Spring Awakening* [...] became the youth musical of its generation, speaking to [...] teens and twenty-somethings [...] in their own terms and eliciting a passionate response,” adding that “theater-loving teens enthusiastically embraced this unintegrated musical, which offered a clear break from the parade of megamusicals and revivals dominating Broadway.”¹³⁷ Even viewers beyond the intended commercial audience were caught up in the production: “One retiree was overheard saying, ‘I didn’t care for the songs or the sex, but it was the best musical I’ve seen all year.’”¹³⁸ In this

¹³⁶ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 19.

¹³⁷ Kenrick, *Musical Theater*, 284.

¹³⁸ Kenrick, *Musical Theater*, 378.

sentiment, Kenrick echoes Wedekind's earlier critics, including Paul Fechter, writing in 1920, Elise Dosenheimer in 1949, and Elizabeth Boa in 1987, who all, with only small variations in enthusiasm, proclaimed that *Frühlings Erwachen* is a paragon for the expression of youthful tenderness and pain.¹³⁹ The newest "youth musical of its generation" is Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's take on Frank Wedekind's classic text. The "historical juxtaposition" of the moments of *Spring Awakening*'s diegetic ruptures with the critical insights of *Frühlings Erwachen*'s historical critics provides some insight into the latter's Benjaminian *Fortleben* and the effectiveness of the insurgent spectacle in the former.

Frühlings Erwachen has received substantial critical attention throughout the 20th century, and in the 21st century, the critical conversation about *Spring Awakening* continues, in large part thanks to this new mode of spectacle. While Broadway's reimagining of *Spring Awakening* has captivated audiences and garnered industrial praise, it has also sparked new controversy. Jonathan Franzen, the well-known novelist who in 2007 published an influential new translation of *Frühlings Erwachen*, identifies Wedekind as a rock star, born a century too soon, and claims that even after the likes of Elvis and Hendrix have ceased to shock anyone, "*Spring Awakening* has become, if anything, even more of a disturbance and a reproach than it was a century ago. What the playwright sacrificed in amplification he's making up for in longevity." While Franzen equates Wedekind to a rock star, he is loath to praise Sater's 2006 production, calling it "insipid" and "overpraised."¹⁴⁰ He claims that it undermines, in almost every imaginable way, the sensitivity with which Wedekind addressed his subjects, and that, even after all the censoring that *Spring Awakening* has undergone, Franzen finds that, to the

¹³⁹ Fechter, *Frank Wedekind*, 34 and 41, Dosenheimer, *Das deutsche soziale Drama*, 190, and Boa, *The Sexual Circus*, 26.

¹⁴⁰ Franzen, introduction, vii.

modern public, “Frank Wedekind’s most grievous offense [is that] he makes fun of teenagers—flat-out laughs at them—to the same degree that he takes them seriously.”¹⁴¹

But other critics disagreed. Julian and Margarete Forsyth, for instance, make no mention of Sater’s betrayal or censoring of the text, and instead find that it “magnificently evoked pent-up teenage fury,” and the musical rendition, rather than detracting from the play, puts it into good 21st century cosmopolitan company alongside other Wedekind musicals and operas recently produced in England and France.¹⁴² What Franzen finds lacking in Sater’s *Spring Awakening*, besides embarrassment, is humor, what Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergmann describes as “*Jugendfröhlichkeit*” (youthful gaiety,) which Schmidt-Bergmann claims must naturally lead to carnality and sexuality.¹⁴³ If Schmidt-Bergmann is correct, “*Jugendfröhlichkeit*” is quite prevalent in Sater’s text, and the attendant humor, though certainly in places crasser than Wedekind’s, abounds.

These various youth-centered discourses of humor, anger, and embarrassment find precedents in Wedekind’s text, which helps explain the insurgent spectacle’s surprising success. Wedekind’s critics made political analyses of the text by juxtaposing the children’s lyrical speech with the adult’s stylized, stereotypical speech.¹⁴⁴ Literary critic Anna Kuhn offers a close and extensive analysis of speech patterns in Wedekind’s work and shows that dialogue seems subordinate to social-critical and didactic goals. The adults’ specialized language, which throughout the play is associated with pedagogy, religion, and the law, criticizes bourgeois convention and reveals the adults’ egotism in their treatment of children. The children’s language, on the other hand, serves two purposes: First, the absence of responsive dialogue

¹⁴¹ Franzen, introduction, xi.

¹⁴² Forsyth, introduction, xxxvi.

¹⁴³ Wedekind, *Frühlings Erwachen*, 105.

¹⁴⁴ Elsner, “Frank Wedekind,” 22, and Diebold, “Wedekind der Narr,” 70, 45-47.

underlines their alienation and the rigid social structures present in the drama; and second, the monologues convey spontaneous outpourings of language, which suggests authenticity and naturalness.¹⁴⁵ Boa argues that Kuhn oversimplifies the children's language, claiming that there is considerable complexity in the fluctuation between colloquial and lyrical styles involving naïve simplicity and sophisticated irony.¹⁴⁶ Sater and Sheik are clearly interested in showing the complexity of their adolescent characters. They use dialogue (which is occasionally lyrical) and actual song lyrics to exaggerate and make spectacular their critique of inter-generational conflict and of a system that exploits the young, even as it coddles them. The theme of perversity and its expression, often accompanied with lyrical obscenity, underscores the generational tension. It is a tension that arises out of silence, and finds its release in song.

To foreground these issues, *Spring Awakening* capitalized both on Americans' concurrent puritanical fascination with and aversion to sex. It also relied on the historical furor that Wedekind's play incited in critics and audiences to lend artistic gravitas and cultural legitimacy to its displays of sexuality. There are scenes within the drama that have historically attracted special critical attention, specifically, when Melchior submits to Wendla's request to beat her physically, and their hayloft rendezvous. The sexually charged scenes raise many philosophical issues, from the importance of self-determination to the hegemony of the patriarchy, and ultimately point to the destructive effects that ignorance can have on the psyche.¹⁴⁷ Sex and sexual substitutes in the drama are important in their own right, thematically, but also as proxies for knowledge and ignorance, respectively.

¹⁴⁵ Kuhn, *Der Dialog bei Frank Wedekind*, 70-80.

¹⁴⁶ Boa, *The Sexual Circus*, 32.

¹⁴⁷ Elsner, *Dialog*, 55, Rothe, *Frank Wedekinds Dramen.*, 22-5, 37, Irmir, *Der Theaterdichter Frank Wedekind*, 113, and Dieth, *Aspects of Distorted Sexual Attitudes*, 83-4.

“Like a Rocker in Concert:” Staging the Insurgent Spectacle

One of the producers of *Spring Awakening*, Tom Hulce, underscored the ways that *Spring Awakening* reconceptualizes contemporary drama when he praised the venue (the Atlantic Theater Company) as “spectacular.”¹⁴⁸ Here Hulce hints at the ways *Spring Awakening* undermines the ritual space of the theater—through its stagecraft. This compliment is also an apropos statement about the technical challenges the production posed and the creative ways they were approached. Christine Jones, the scenic designer, puts a finer point on the play’s structure: “There’s the notion that sometimes you’re in a parlor and it’s Victorian light, some kind of lamp that you might see in a parlor. And then the moment they break into song, it’s electric. It becomes neon. It becomes florescent.”¹⁴⁹ Kevin Adams, the lighting designer, makes the same point about the aesthetics of light in the show, which suggests the Debordian “false consciousness of time” discussed in the previous chapter, when he says, “I think what this show is, is nineteenth-century objects with twenty-first-century light sculptures.”¹⁵⁰ The environment in which the spectacle happens is perceptively divided into two spheres of action: “there’s kind of a dim glow to a lot of the school scenes, a dim, sort of dated glow [...]. And then, when you get to those rock songs, it’s twenty-first century. This whole other century of light pops on.”¹⁵¹ The lighting thus clearly demarcates the shifts. It affords audiences two concurrent experiences: an avant-garde theatrical with softer lighting and a rock concert with the electric surfaces of Broadway advertising.

When *Spring Awakening* moved from the Atlantic Theater to the O’Neill, the task of maintaining the rock concert venue within the trappings of a theater with lighting became more

¹⁴⁸ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 67.

¹⁴⁹ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 69.

¹⁵⁰ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 69.

¹⁵¹ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 69.

critical. Critic Jeremy McCarter notes that “Kevin Adams has dreamed up the most blazing lighting plot on Broadway. He’s not afraid to saturate the stage with bubble patterns or sprays of light, as they do at Irving Plaza or Bowery Ballroom when a blistering solo demands it.”¹⁵² On Broadway, though, it would not have been enough to turn the stage into a rock spectacle: “One drawback to putting high-energy rock musicals on Broadway is that they tend to look silly in these gilded playhouses. So Adams just mounts neon all over everything, even in the audience. In a flash—so to speak—Broadway looks a lot more hospitable to music incubated in a garage.”¹⁵³ Broadway spent decades cultivating its theatrical spaces to be temples or shrines: ritual spaces imbued with importance extrinsic to the works being staged there. By giving the gilded and velvet-draped surfaces of the theater a coat of neon, and at the same time unifying the stage and the auditorium with both light and its apparatus, Adams claims the entire space for the production, and draws the audience into the concert venue.

Ironically, when the show moved from the Atlantic Theater, an old church, the set designer reproduced that space in the show’s new venue. Susan Hilferty, the show’s costume designer, said, “We knew there was a mysterious chemical experience that had happened in that space. There are so many times in the script where they talk about institutions like the church or school which are oppressive parts of the world [...] so it seemed important to reproduce our original space and bring that sensation with us.”¹⁵⁴ Set Designer Christine Jones bounded the larger space of the O’Neill Theater using a rear brick wall littered with bric-a-brac that evokes the play’s sexual tensions. Moreover, many of the wall-hangings are emblematic or symbolic and indicate the spectacle’s broader political ambitions beyond just entertainment.

¹⁵² McCarter, “No Show Tunes.”

¹⁵³ McCarter, “No Show Tunes.”

¹⁵⁴ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 167.

As a spectacle whose primary thematic concern is mortality, sex and death, *Spring Awakening*'s set design is as important as the action on stage to delivering the show's political message: it embodies what the play professes in speech and song. Thus, alongside the lighting and set design, Jones adapted a device crucial for the temporal shifts of *Spring Awakening*: a center stage section that can both sink into an open grave or be elevated in the play's pivotal scene to become the hayloft. The platform gives sex and death an actual and symbolic centrality in the theater. It imbues sex with formal significance by literally elevating it for the audience, both for better viewing, and symbolically, by raising it above the drama and trauma of the action on stage. As a grave, it leaves a hole in the stage, in Melchior. It is also a potential exit for him, but as Jonathan Groff says of his character, "he realizes that if he kills himself, all that has happened to him, and the lives of his dear friends, will no longer matter. That all will have been for nothing."¹⁵⁵ The nihilism Melchior confronts exposes the tradition of aversion that Broadway Theater has to death: that it is all for nothing. By denying the abyss, Melchior affirms the progressive agenda of the play, showing his "very deep desire to change."¹⁵⁶

Another carryover from *The Atlantic* was the lateral banks of onstage audience seating, but in the larger space, four additional singers were added to increase the range and clarity of the spectacle's musical elements.¹⁵⁷ According to critic David Rooney, "The crystalline sound allows for serious volume without impeding comprehension of the lyrics."¹⁵⁸ Downstage steps over the orchestra pit further eliminated distance between audience and players, which enhanced the show's immediacy and contributed to the overall aesthetic goals of the spectacle: creating an

¹⁵⁵ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 164.

¹⁵⁶ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 164.

¹⁵⁷ Rooney, "Spring Awakening."

¹⁵⁸ Rooney, "Spring Awakening."

intimate space, a communal space, so that the action on stage was not merely spectacular, but participatory.

Spring Awakening achieves the rare Broadway feat of political maneuvering and spectacularity. Though contemporary Broadway musicals are often buoyed by secure finances, “they’ve got schizophrenic tastes.”¹⁵⁹ Changing sensibilities have helped push shows away from the orchestral sound that long defined Broadway productions and into various clumsy embraces of a Broadway producer’s concept of rock or pop music. As McCarter notes of *Spring Awakening*’s musical innovation: “Whether it’s wresting pop into a traditional mode or just swiping pop catalogs in their entirety, the resulting mix of ancient form and newish content has produced a muddle: Most new musicals haven’t sounded like the rich classic style lately, but neither do they have pop’s cheap, authentic joys, managing only a gassy blend of high and low, bad and worse. The *Spring Awakening* approach to this conundrum is to tell everyone involved, in so many words, to fuck off.”¹⁶⁰

The experience of the drama, the actual body-in-the-theater participation, is most indicative of the production’s spectacular nature. It is designed to give the audience a participatory, visceral, and at the same time critical experience. The effectiveness of that design on every single audience member is incalculable, but the production’s focus on the body, and the political and theatrical possibilities it contains, is indisputable. At certain moments in the production, such as the iconic coupling between Wendla and Melchior, cast members appear on stage and observe and sing to the actors as they perform. Within scenes actors watch actors, who are in turn being watched by diegetically inscribed audience members on stage, who are in turn being watched by the wider audience off stage. The result of this observation, or “gazing,” is that

¹⁵⁹ McCarter, “No Show Tunes.”

¹⁶⁰ McCarter, “No Show Tunes.”

the onstage sex becomes the diegetic and visceral focus. Notably, the actors, who occasionally both are and act as audience members over the course of the production, add an additional layer of both complexity and spectacle to the production. Director Michael Mayer once noted that he had to get them to stop acting, saying, “You’re acting like you’re watching. Just watch. If it’s funny, laugh. But please pay attention, because if you don’t, and I look at you and you’re just drifting, that’s not good, either. Don’t fake it.”¹⁶¹

The directorial impulse for authenticity makes the text—in the words of the producers, *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind as adapted by Steven Sater—the primary focus of what Mayer freely calls “political theater.” The act of watching the play is part of the spectacle: the actors alternately fulfill their roles as actors, singers, and audience members, which, according to Mayer, shows that “there is no pretense. No fourth wall. Actors, musicians, lights, and empty stage, basically. And these words. And this music.”¹⁶² The conspicuous brandishing and use of microphones, lighting, and acting underscore the disjointed but clearly present relationship between the political play and the rock concert.

These elements are already present at the end of Act I, when Wendla and Melchior are in the hayloft. The “hayloft” is rather a six-by-five-foot space suspended above the rest of the stage; it is a pedestal upon which Melchior and Wendla are raised. After Wendla loses her virginity, the act of which is the focal point for both the rest of the cast and the audience, there is a break: the intermission. After that, “all bets [are] off.” Act I is focused almost entirely on sex, both its nuances and its accomplishment. Act II is a head-long rush toward death. As Mayer contends,

¹⁶¹ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 71.

¹⁶² Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 71.

“In the show, the deaths wouldn’t have happened without sex, but you can’t have life without sex, either.”¹⁶³

Though his analysis of the play’s action may seem facile, Mayer touches on the fact that this spectacle deals directly with what many historians deem a primary function of modern American theater: to confront audiences with the reality and consequences of sex and death.¹⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that the spectacle is made up of and reflects the audience’s own fears and desires, and this amalgamation and critical reflection remained economically viable. Though Sally Porterfield, among others, claims that American mass culture promotes perpetual adolescence,¹⁶⁵ *Spring Awakening* makes a fierce call to move beyond that adolescence. Leaving behind the traditional Broadway spectacles designed simply to dazzle and distract but without any conspicuous political message, this insurgent spectacle engages all sides of the American political spectrum. On the one hand, it openly mocks and criticizes moral absolutism, heteronormativity, capitalism, and authoritarian and bureaucratic attitudes, as when Melchior derides the church and “the Parentocracy” in his journal.¹⁶⁶ On the other hand, it also pokes fun at political correctness, sexuality, the arts, children, parents, families, and the trials of “growing up.” The production develops its political message through the drama of repressed and subsequently gushing sexuality, the mortal (literally) seriousness of “success” in bourgeois life and of educating oneself, and the attendant rock concert that addresses these concerns. The juxtaposition of these disparate aspects, the constant shifting of perspective and roles, is what makes the production spectacular.

¹⁶³ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 71.

¹⁶⁴ Chambers, “Or I’ll Die,” 162-76.

¹⁶⁵ Porterfield, *Perpetual Adolescence*.

¹⁶⁶ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 32, 46.

The audience is subject to what Siegfried Kracauer calls the “cult of distraction,” but this audience is *also* critically engaged. If the American viewing public has a pre-disposition for a dissociative aesthetic relationship to violence and sex,¹⁶⁷ *Spring Awakening* does, or can, reconnect them by laying bare the audiences’ role as both actor and viewer, as the actors are both. The audience’s complicity with and implication in the action of the drama and the aesthetic spectacle separate the production finally from the adolescent musical spectacles—in media of all types—which both preceded and proceed it.

“I’ve Never Felt... Anything:” Sex and Violence in the Insurgent Spectacle

Act One of *Spring Awakening* examines how social systems thwart, pervert, or subject the characters’ basic needs and desires. This it accomplishes by representing sexual abuse, rape, and incest as products of destructive social institutions. In the songs “Mama Who Bore Me,” “The Bitch of Living,” “The Word of Your Body,” and “The Guilty Ones,” (which begins Act Two, and serves as a bridge between the thematic concerns of sex and death) Sater and Sheik develop musical statements that undermine “musical-theater conventions” and prioritize emotional intensity and rhetorical power over accepted notions of profitability and acceptability.¹⁶⁸ The songs emphasize the powerful danger and attraction of sex, but, rather than offer a puritanical after-school-special lesson, they emphasize the imperative of having, enjoying, and talking about sex, not in spite of its enormous social and biological risks but because of them.

From the perspective of the aloof and austere adults, sex in *Spring Awakening* is first a means of reproduction, and second, a secret to hide from one’s offspring. Sex is immoral and

¹⁶⁷ Denby, “The Massacre in Aurora.”

¹⁶⁸ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 20 and Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 23, 39, 64, and 77.

quite literally unspeakable outside of its biological and Church-sanctioned roles. This complex of generationally imposed ignorance comprises the bulk of the relationship between Wendla and her mother. The play opens with Wendla examining herself “as if at a mirror,” singing the refrain to “Mama Who Bore Me”:

Mama who bore me.

Mama who gave me

No way to handle things. Who made me sad.¹⁶⁹

The audience then gets its first impression of the play’s lighting aesthetic and program of “ruptures,” as the blue light of self-reflection the play opens with shifts “to the world of 1891: a provincial German living room.”¹⁷⁰ Here, Wendla complains to her mother at the beginning of the play, “I’m an aunt for the second time now, and I still have no idea how it happens.”¹⁷¹ The pronoun “it” bespeaks Wendla’s ignorance about sex. When her mother rebuffs her inquiries about the topic, she retorts, “But you cannot imagine I still believe in the stork.”¹⁷²

Yet Wendla presses her mother for answers, but when she finally acquiesces, she demands that Wendla physically submit herself as a pre-requisite for her sexual education. Wendla kneels obediently and places her head in the mother’s lap as her mother tells her that “For a woman to bear a child, she must...in her own personal way, she must...love her husband. Love him, as she can love only him. *Only* him...she must love—with her whole...heart. There. Now, you know everything.”¹⁷³ To peals of laughter, both from the paying audience and the actors watching off-stage, Wendla’s mother addresses her daughter with euphemism and ellipses,

¹⁶⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 15.

¹⁷⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 15.

¹⁷¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 16.

¹⁷² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 16.

¹⁷³ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 17.

and they indicate the intellectual and emotional void into which Wendla will soon fall. “Loving” a husband with one’s “heart” makes sense to the audience, but for Wendla, her mother’s obfuscation positions her to fall victim to her own ignorance.

Thus, only moments into the spectacle, *Spring Awakening* is already mingling “Deeply tragic scenes [...] with moments of hilarious farce.”¹⁷⁴ Kuhn maintains of *Frühlings Erwachen* that in this juxtaposition, Wedekind is anticipating the alienation effect central to Brecht’s theater, and *Spring Awakening* continues to evolve that dramatic tradition.¹⁷⁵ The refrains of juxtaposition and the tension between the obvious overtures to tragedy and the more subtle but persistent use of humor forms the Broadway spectacle’s dramatic and emotional basis, but it “[turns] up the volume,” allowing the characters to “rock out.”¹⁷⁶ This insurgent spectacle utilizes heightened emotional intensity alongside its structural and aesthetic ambivalence to make the contentious aspects of Wedekind’s work into the driving force of its own critical and economic success.¹⁷⁷ Because of the elliptical structure and dearth of linear, plot-driven action in Wedekind’s play, critics struggled to typify the work as Expressionist or Naturalist drama. This struggle turned into a major advantage for Sater and Sheik, who exploited *Frühlings Erwachen*’s interiority and discrete episodes to create the insurgent spectacle.

The opening lines of *Spring Awakening* between Wendla and her mother introduce the audience to the political stakes of the play’s representation of sex, and how that representation

¹⁷⁴ Gittleman, *Frank Wedekind*, 57. The exact identity of *Frühlings Erwachen* as tragedy has been historically hotly contested (see Goldmann, “*Frühlings Erwachen*,” 120, Kapp, *Frank Wedekind*, 111-13, Josef Hofmiller, “Wedekind” in *Zeitgenossen* (Münich: Süddeutsche Monatshefte, 1910), 92, 100, Joachim Friedenthal, “Einleitung” in *Das Wedekindbuch* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1914), 57, Fechter, *Frank Wedekind*, 42, Hanns Martin Elster, *Wedekind und seine besten Bühnenwerke* (Berlin: Franz Schneider, 1922), 21, and Rothe, *Frank Wedekinds Dramen*, 8, 20.) Sater and Sheik’s choice to continue to walk the line between tragedy and comedy encourages this critical conversation to continue.

¹⁷⁵ Kuhn, *Der Dialog bei Frank Wedekind*, 79.

¹⁷⁶ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 19.

¹⁷⁷ Best, *Frank Wedekind*, 64.

eventually plays out in the hayloft. Steven Sater claimed that “We wanted to create a story that was resonant today. Did we want to tell kids that sex is bad? I didn’t.”¹⁷⁸ Director Michael Mayer makes that ideological position explicit:

From a political perspective, we wanted to make [the production] as sex-positive as it could be. [...] And to follow the original play, to present Melchior as a kid who gets information and then show the only possible outcome of his putting that information to use to be rape and a botched abortion and death, just seemed...wrong. That seemed very archaic to me, and irresponsible. It’s something that could easily feed into the kind of right-wing, religious, theocratic power that exists only too strongly right now in this country. That was anathema to me. And to Steven and to Duncan.¹⁷⁹

The producers’ progressive politics inform the structural innovations—the elements of the insurgent spectacle—found in the play. The songs, the first of which is “Mama Who Bore Me,” are the first significant departure, both in form and style, from Wedekind’s work. Through these musical interludes, Sater comments on the action of the play, and he makes this clear by having them take place outside of its diegetic space. With changes in lighting, usually neon, and hand-held microphones pulled from the folds of period costumes, the musical elements of the play contrast sharply with the formal and often dour action of the rest of the play. The songs, the play’s synchronic rock concert, function dramatically as internal monologues or 21st century commentary on 19th century happenings. Wendla, unsatisfied with her mother’s blustering and wholly inadequate response to her inquiries, yells after her mother to stay and explain, as Frau Bergman rushes off stage. In her frustration and despair, Wendla, accompanied by a chorus of

¹⁷⁸ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 41.

¹⁷⁹ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 41.

the cast's girls, laments again, "in the manner of a contemporary young woman," and with an edge in her voice:

Mama who bore me

Mama who gave me

No way to handle things. Who made me so bad.¹⁸⁰

These four lines summarize Wendla's relationship with her mother, and indeed all of the play's intergenerational relationships. The children are punished for unsuccessfully negotiating the minefield of taboo and proscription laid out by the older generation. With song and lighting, *Spring Awakening* deftly attacks a sexually oppressive culture and simultaneously makes an impassioned case for sexual education, which critics have argued were hallmarks of *Frühlings Erwachen*.¹⁸¹ The implicit critique of patriarchy and American neo-conservatism in *Spring Awakening* begins with the tension between Wendla and her mother, and eventually finds expression in Melchior's manifesto against what he dubs the "Parentocracy," which is ultimately ruled by the children's fathers. The degree to which sex is the unspoken focus of all generational relationships appears in starkest contrast in a conversation between Moritz and Melchior:

Moritz: Well, your mother certainly is remarkable.

Melchior: Until she catches her son reading Goethe.

Moritz: I think she meant the story of Gretchen and her illegitimate child.

Melchior: Yes. You see how obsessively everyone fixes on that story. It's as if the entire world were mesmerized by penis and vagina.¹⁸²

Melchior's mother focuses on the *Faust*'s occasional bourgeois impropriety over its cultural and educational value. Furthermore, Frau Gabor's focus on the sexual aspects of the text foreshadow her later retreat into bourgeois and patriarchal close-mindedness, which results in

¹⁸⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 18.

¹⁸¹ Boa, *The Sexual Circus*, 26, and Diethel, *Aspects of Distorted Sexual Attitudes*, 79.

¹⁸² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 34.

Melchior's punitive stay in the reformatory and bridges the thematic and ideological gap between discussions of sexuality and mortality.

Melchior's corporal and social punishment comes not only at the hands of his parents and their moral misgivings, but directly results from Wendla's sexual ignorance and repression, which are in turn consequences of Frau Bergman's moral prudery. When Frau Bergman informs Wendla that Wendla is pregnant, she thinks that marriage, rather than sex, is the prerequisite for pregnancy. When her mother asks her what she has done, meaning with whom she has had sex, Wendla answers the question at face value, simply stating "I don't know. Truly, I don't."¹⁸³ Her innocence reveals the vastness of her ignorance. She then realizes her folly and implicates her mother, asking "My God, why didn't you tell me everything?" Frau Bergman slaps her for her outburst and firmly reasserts her role as moral authority, and, after Wendla's death, a mortal one as well.¹⁸⁴

Wendla's sexual repression and ignorance had already revealed itself in her masochistic desire to be beaten:

Wendla: But I've never been beaten—my entire life. I've never...felt...

Melchior: What?

Wendla: *Anything*.

Melchior gives in to her request, and beats her until he becomes angry and loses control.¹⁸⁵ Actress Lea Michele, who played Wendla, draws special attention to her sado-masochistic relationship with Melchior and the importance the tension between the scenes has to the insurgent spectacle. She says the "beating scene is the most difficult scene in the show." Her love scene, even though she is partially nude on stage is "natural;" she does not "even think as an actress. [She] just [does.]"¹⁸⁶ By contrast, the beating scene is "tricky." That, for the actress, is

¹⁸³ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 80.

¹⁸⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 80.

¹⁸⁵ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 48-50.

¹⁸⁶ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 40.

when she feels most exposed, and she reveals the scene's alienating potential when she notes, "People have love scenes onstage, but how many times have you watched a scene in a show where someone asks someone else to beat them with a stick?"¹⁸⁷ More than adding prurient shock value to the show's embedded rock concert, the beating and love making, which Wendla approaches with the same ignorance and emotional innocence, draw attention to some contemporary American cultural priorities, which Michele reveals when she notes, "Everyone always says, 'It must be so hard doing that hayloft scene. It must be so hard, and that's such an exposed scene, where you bare your breasts and all this stuff.'"¹⁸⁸ In fact, for the actress, writer, and director, it is the violence, and not the sex, that is most harmful. What *Spring Awakening* attempted to do was re-focus audiences' moral and political compasses not on the control of (in particular female) bodies, but on the violence done to them.

The complex nexus of sex and violence is reflected formally in the ruptures that surround this scene and foreshadow the lovers' coupling and tragic fates. In the song "The Word of Your Body," after Wendla and Melchior come across one another in the woods and experience a "moment of intellectual engagement," the dappled light on stage (representing the trees under which the two talk) begins to shift between crimson, blue, and gold.¹⁸⁹ Wendla and Melchior tease one another longingly until they reach the chorus together, and then, in darkness but for a spotlight, lighting them from the waist up, they sing:

O, I'm gonna be wounded.

O, I'm gonna be your wound.

O, I'm gonna bruise you.

¹⁸⁷ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 40.

¹⁸⁸ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 40.

¹⁸⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 39.

O, you're gonna be my bruise.¹⁹⁰

After Melchior beats Wendla and leaves her alone and sobbing on the ground, off-stage and spotlighted, two members of the chorus repeat this refrain, drawing the audience's attention pointedly to what just transpired, and what is about to happen in the hayloft.¹⁹¹

Martha voices the drives at work within Wendla when she recounts the beatings and abuse she and Ilse suffer under the tyranny of their parents, and the indefinite line between punishment and sex.¹⁹² For the girls, sex has only ever been about power, not pleasure. Additionally, the girls have only ever been subjected to that sexual power, not the wielders of it. Sater makes the patriarchy under which they suffer brutally obvious, while at the same time revealing the children's more tender sensibilities, when Anna, Martha, Thea, and Wendla discuss how Martha's father beats her. Despite her obvious welts and bruises, Martha refuses the girls' offer for help in exposing the abuse, fearing she'll be kicked out of her house, a consequence Ilse has already suffered. Wendla offers Martha not only her sympathy but her body, saying, "I wish I could somehow go through it for you...." Thea then comforts Martha with a patriarchal platitude: "My Uncle Klaus says, 'If you don't discipline a child, you don't love it.'" Martha rejoins, resigned to her fate, "That must be."¹⁹³

This declaration brings about a dramatic shift in lighting. The soft stage light, complete with cast shadows from the trees under which the girls are walking, is cut for a few seconds by total darkness, and then replaced by a single, intense spotlight, which interrogates the singer in front of a single stand microphone. This sets the tone for "The Dark I Know Well," a song featuring metallic and wooden percussion and discordant violin, reminiscent of the industrial

¹⁹⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 40.

¹⁹¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 50.

¹⁹² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 43-6.

¹⁹³ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 43-4.

rock sound of Nine Inch Nails, for example. Martha and Ilse recount their complementary tales of rape and incest, and the chorus of boys joins to sing the final lines:

There's a part I can't tell
About the dark I know well.¹⁹⁴

The chorus delivers the final line back-lit in lurid red neon, before a blackout. Sex is unspeakable for these children within the diegetic space of the play, because they are powerless, and even in the liberatory, interiorized space of the rock spectacle, they can only bring themselves to say that they are unable to talk about the things they suffer.

Sater conflates sex and power (expressed as violence) once again when the boys in the reformatory have their “circle jerk,” which they perform in a hole at center stage. They turn masturbation into a betting game. Melchior does not participate, but is drawn into their game when the boys take a letter he received from Wendla and use it as the object of their sport rather than the collection of coins. One of the boys, Rupert, wields a straight razor to make Melchior comply with the group's sadistic will, but this violent turn, ironically, allows Melchior to escape the reformatory.¹⁹⁵ Melchior is able to avoid both the replacement of sex with power and the results of that system.

Masturbation plays other roles in the text as well, and not the negative one it plays in the reformatory. In “The Bitch of Living,” Moritz and the chorus of schoolboys sing of its ameliorative properties. Masturbation becomes a means to mediate emotional trauma and adolescent frustration, as the angel from Moritz dream tells him:

Give me that hand, please, and the itch you can't control,
Let me teach you how to handle all the sadness in your soul.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 46.

¹⁹⁵ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 84-86.

¹⁹⁶ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 23.

Here, Wedekind's famous humor finds new voice in Sater's lyrics, as the audience can laugh at the boys' innuendo while simultaneously recognizing their deep emotional disturbance. Sater and Sheik's musical interludes, unlike previous productions, provide audiences a reprieve from Moritz's constant angst. Of all the production's songs, "The Bitch of Living" is most clearly associated with a rock concert. The stage directions indicate, at the height of Moritz's fear and anxiety in the classroom, that there should be an "intense alt-rock guitar riff. [...] The world around Moritz comes to a halt as concert-like light finds him. He turns out in song."¹⁹⁷ This is a moment of rebellion. Even though Moritz is "shackled" by the fear and anxiety engendered by the social and educational institutions in which he finds himself ensnared, there is still an avenue of escape available to him.¹⁹⁸ That escape, even though in the world of the drama it is only internal, reveals for the audience one of the fundamental purposes of the insurgent spectacle: to connect people, to give expression to the dissatisfaction that other forms of spectacle attempt to ameliorate or even deny.

Hanschen, too, spends a great deal of his on-stage time in self-pleasure, but unlike the boys in the reformatory he completes his act while contemplating classic beauty, not out of competition or aggression. Sater also shows Hanschen's tryst with Correggio's *Io* in conjunction with Georg's piano lesson, led by his busty (and new to Sater's imagining of *Spring Awakening*), lusty piano instructor Fräulein Grossebustenhälter (Miss Big Bra).¹⁹⁹ This juxtaposition shows the boys' fantasies at work, and their sexual exploration in these contexts is accompanied by music (Georg) and art (Hanschen), which transforms their fantasies from tools to reach climax into a more comprehensive aesthetic experience, even as they sing, with no small hint of irony,

¹⁹⁷ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 23.

¹⁹⁸ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 19.

¹⁹⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 29.

“We’ve all got our junk, and my junk is you.”²⁰⁰ *Spring Awakening* does not represent sex as exclusively dangerous or dour or sinful. In “My Junk” and “Touch Me,” the exuberant, playful, undeniable lust that is such a common trope of teen relationships comes to the fore.²⁰¹ “My Junk” is a sugary pop song that the girls start, “glistening in girl-group light,” bathed in pinks and reds and bright spot lights.²⁰² As Hanschen and Georg work their way through their sexual fantasies in the bathroom and at the piano, respectively, they and then the boys in the cast reprise the chorus, and the stage is lit in deep red light as Hanschen masturbates to the rhythm of the song. As he and the song climax, there is a flash of silver light, and the scene ends with a blackout cut, and a transition to Melchior philosophizing on the morality of sexuality.²⁰³ “Touch Me” tones down the frantic exuberance of “My Junk,” and is accompanied by subtle, longing 12 string guitar chords.²⁰⁴ As cast members writhe on stage in rhythm with the music, the guitar and chorus singers give an R & B tone to the song, which begins in soft gold and red light. As the song climaxes, the light shifts to bright red, and the entire cast sings:

Touch me—just like that.

Now lower down, where the sins lie...

Love me—just for a bit...

We’ll wander down, where the winds sigh...²⁰⁵

The song strongly conflates sex and sin, but emphasizes the teens’ longing, acceptance, and need for both. Rather than being proscriptive, “My Junk” and “Touch Me” celebrate the vitality and risk of sex and love.

²⁰⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 32, Boa, *The Sexual Circus*, 44.

²⁰¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 29-38

²⁰² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 29.

²⁰³ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 31-2.

²⁰⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 35.

²⁰⁵ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 37.

The spectacle's intense focus on the social and physical consequences of heterosexual love is somewhat ameliorated by explorations of alternative means of sexual pleasure. While partially content with autoeroticism, Hanschen is much more interested in homoeroticism. Not a moment after the boys' sing about the bitch of living, that is, of the necessity of masturbation and the torment of unfulfilled needs, and deep existential crisis, he invites Ernst to "study" Homer with him, suggesting they could "maybe do a little Achilles and Patroclus," an allusion to the homosexual themes of *The Iliad*.²⁰⁶ This flirting leads Hanschen and Ernst eventually to a vineyard at sunset, where Hanschen seduces his friend, after elucidating for him the three (presumably sexual) options available to boys in their situation: A man "can let the status quo defeat him—like Moritz. He can rock the boat—like Melchior—and be expelled. Or he can bide his time, and let the System work for *him*—like me."²⁰⁷ Hanschen then explains, with thinly veiled suggestion, how the future can unfold for people like him and Ernst. He encourages his friend to think "of the future as a pail of whole milk. One man sweats and stirs—churning it into butter—like Otto, for example. Another man frets, and spills his milk, and cries all night. Like Georg. But me, well, I'm like a pussycat, I just skim off the cream..."²⁰⁸ This sexual banter stands in sharp relief to the fearful, angst-ridden heterosexual encounters in the play. Hanschen and Ernst's relationship stands outside of the heterosexual binary to which every other member of the drama pays such close attention, either in order to consummate it, or to avoid discussion of it entirely.

The spectacle's emphasis on sex in Act I eventually and seemingly inevitably develops into an emphasis on mortality: living and dying and the means by which they are carried out.

²⁰⁶ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 26.

²⁰⁷ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 77.

²⁰⁸ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 77.

Though shorter, *Spring Awakening*'s second act does the important work of turning the techniques developed in the first act and employed in light-hearted sexual liberation to the more serious and perilous task of undermining pervasive and naturalized social institutions.

“It’s the Bitch of Living:” Mortality, Power, and Politics in the Insurgent Spectacle

Alongside the intense discussion of sex and sexuality, the insurgent spectacle carves out a political space for itself within the schema of mass culture in a second way. It critiques those ideologies of the American neoliberal spectacle that naturalize the Christian religion, capitalism, state power, and heteronormativity. In naturalizing these institutions, the neoliberal spectacle reifies and then ignores the violence and mortal pressure under which the subjects of these systems suffer. The insurgent spectacle draws attention to these systems by representing (sometimes literal) life and death struggles and teen anxiety about mortality, death, and failure in formally innovative ways. The first act of *Spring Awakening* sets into motion the means and causes of the primary dramatic figures' suffering, while the second act is almost entirely focused on their deaths and the damage done to them. In the second act, the aesthetic focus shifts from red and gold light to blue and silver as the characters move away from passion toward self-reflection, and the political focus changes from sex-as-love to sex-as-power and an inevitable precursor to death.

The passion and fear in the other songs are consummated in Melchior and Wendla's relationship. “The Mirror Blue Night,” which Melchior sings (with the boys as back-up singers,) explicitly connects the songs' interiority with the production's color palate. Lit in blue light, which throughout the production signifies that the characters are being self-reflective, Melchior shows the destructive side of that reflection:

And the whispers of fear, the chill up the spine,
Will steal away too, with a flick of the light.
The minute you do, with fingers so blind,
You remove every bit of the blue from your mind.²⁰⁹

During his performance, a distraught Melchior tears at his clothes and hair and moves erratically. His thoughts torture him, and only the “light” and “blind” fingers can rescue him. He finds that light and those fingers with Wendla in the hayloft. As the center of the stage rises on ropes, Melchior is lit “in the warm light of dusk.”²¹⁰ Wendla discovers him and climbs up unto the softly swaying platform, and as they begin their love-making, the cast begins to softly sing the “Gospel-tinged” “I Believe.”²¹¹ As the lovers clumsily negotiate (physically and intellectually) their relationship, the song builds in intensity, as the red and gold lights of the stage and in the audience deepen and intensify. As Melchior penetrates Wendla, the chorus, in a crescendo, offers a kind of benediction to their coupling:

Peace and joy be with them,
Harmony and wisdom...
I believe...²¹²

With that proclamation and Melchior’s triumphant penetration, Act I ends with a blackout and roaring applause. It is only at the beginning of the next act, after *la petit mort*, that Melchior, Wendla, and the audience begin to reckon with what has happened.

As Jonathan Groff (Melchior) notes about “The Guilty Ones,” it “lets the audience know that after [Melchior and Wendla] made love, he was okay, she was okay; they were both happy

²⁰⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 56.

²¹⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 56.

²¹¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 58.

²¹² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 61-2.

and they did it and they were both in love. So that when the end of the play comes around and Wendla's dead, Melchior's completely upset. As opposed to her being just a girl he fucked and him not caring about her anyway. It's the end of his world."²¹³ The lovers, with the help of the chorus, examine what they have done in the hayloft:

And now our bodies are the guilty ones—
Our touch
Will fill every hour.
Huge and dark,
Oh our hearts
Will murmur the blues from on high,
Then whisper some silver reply...²¹⁴

"The Guilty Ones" bridges both the temporal and thematic divides of *Spring Awakening*. As the lovers finish the coupling that leads to Wendla's death, the focus of both the action on stage and the moments of musical interiority turn to contemplate mortality. "The Guilty Ones" also highlights how the techniques of the insurgent spectacle shift audience expectations of both the form and content of the production. They introduce subtle changes to the now-familiar diegetic ruptures throughout the production by making use of shifting color palettes and spotlighting techniques. Out of this deeply conflicted (but ultimately liberatory) sexual discourse Sater also shows the consequences of sexual ignorance and moralistic prudery: Wendla's abortion and death. Even as these personal tragedies are the subjects of the play, they are the political material of the spectacle. Beyond their personal struggles, the youth of *Spring Awakening* are all subject to the larger systems of the adult world, among them, systems of education, religion, economics, social convention, and finally, to the biological imperative of their own mortality.

²¹³ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 41.

²¹⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 64-5.

The systems of power and control to which the children are subject mediate and to some degree instigate the tragedies they suffer. Melchior laments the state of the educational system, complaining: “In a more progressive world, of course, we could all attend the same school. Boys and girls together. Wouldn’t that be remarkable?”²¹⁵ The audience can extrapolate from Melchior’s rhetoric that, were the children allowed to interact socially on a more regular basis, the results of their eventual contact would be less disastrous. The other great tragedy of the play is Moritz’s suicide, and he is clearly the victim both of an inability to adapt to adolescence or to a bourgeois educational system that consigns certain members to failure. Herr Knochenbruch and Fräulein Knuppeldick (the invented-for-*Spring-Awakening* school master Mr. Bone Fracture and Miss Big Stick, respectively) make Moritz’s failure explicit and deliberate when they discuss his troublingly good performance on his mid-terms, and agree that he will fail his finals.²¹⁶ Melchior reflects on the nature of this system and explores the motivations behind both its existence and its continued maintenance: “The trouble is: the terrible prerogative of the Parentocracy in Secondary Education... a world where teachers—like parents—view us as merely so much raw material for an obedient and productive society... a unified, military-like body, where all that is weak must be hammered away... where the progress of the students reflects back only on the rank and order of the faculty, and therefore a single low mark can be seen as a threat [...]”²¹⁷ The style of Melchior’s journal entry is that of a political treatise, and the capitalized “Parentocracy” has an obvious dystopian aspect. The foreboding in Melchior’s reflection is palpable, and the “weak” that must be “hammered away” is a clear reference to Moritz and foreshadowing of his eventual suicide.

²¹⁵ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 38.

²¹⁶ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 42.

²¹⁷ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 46-7.

Sater and Sheik introduce audiences to these themes in the first scene in the school house, where, in quick succession, “All That’s Known” and “The Bitch of Living” expose the systemic negative effects of the systems of control in which the boys find themselves.²¹⁸ The boys’ Latin teacher, Herr Sonnenstich, beats Melchior with his teacher’s cane as he tries to cover for Moritz’s mistakes in reciting the *Aeneid*. These blows quell Melchior’s rebellion and free interpretation of the text, but they make him resentful and he turns inward. The “numbing” recitation of Latin acts as prelude and rhythmic background to Melchior’s “contemporary, electronic” musical rebellion.²¹⁹ Suddenly, the classroom dims and Melchior pulls a hand microphone from an interior jacket pocket and—spotlighted, “like a rocker in concert,” sings:

All that’s known/ In History, in Science,
Overthrown
At school, at home, by blind men.
You doubt them,
And soon they bark and hound you—
Till everything you say is just another bad about you.
All they say/ Is “Trust in What is Written.”
Wars are made,
And somehow that is wisdom.
Thought is suspect,
And money is their idol,
And nothing is okay unless it’s scripted in their Bible.²²⁰

Here Melchior enumerates the systems of power he has discovered set against him and his schoolmates, and from which the only possible escape is one of his own making:

You watch me—

Just watch me—

I’m calling,

²¹⁸ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 21-6.

²¹⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 21.

²²⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 21.

And one day all will know.²²¹

Melchior's resolve to continue his struggle for intellectual and physical independence separates the self-motivated secular-humanist of Sater's adaptation from the boy saved *deus ex machina* in Wedekind's drama, and sharply emphasizes the critical political program of the insurgent spectacle.²²²

The progressive politics and life and death stakes of the drama continue to develop in "The Bitch of Living." The song begins as an alternative-rock lament of sexual frustration, led by Moritz and given a chorus by the other boys. Melchior is conspicuously silent, as the boys complain

It's the bitch of living

With nothing but your hand.

Just the bitch of living

As someone you can't stand.²²³

The initial humor and sexual innuendo take a sharp and darker turn as Melchior joins the song and invokes Nietzsche:

It's the bitch of living—

And living in your head.

It's the bitch of living

And sensing God is dead.²²⁴

²²¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 22.

²²² Sater, introduction, x-xi.

²²³ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 24.

²²⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 25.

Moritz and Melchior are lit by white concert spotlights as they voice their troubles, and the rest of the cast dances in red neon light, rocking out to their own “unacknowledged ‘I want,’” to which “The Bitch of Living” gives voice.²²⁵ Melchior’s nihilism gives much more urgency to his adolescent travails, because he, unlike his contemporaries, has no coddling system of belief in any reward beyond what he experiences for himself. His “I want” is not sexual release, but freedom and self-determination.²²⁶ Melchior puts a finer point on the importance of the here-and-now in the final refrain:

Moritz and the Boys: It’s the bitch of living—

And getting what you get.

Just the bitch of living—

Melchior: And knowing this is it.²²⁷

What follows is a final, desperate choral exclamation:

God, is this it?

This can’t be it.

God, what a bitch!

At this, the stage goes pitch black and the audience erupts in raucous cheering that lasts through the opening of the next scene. The juxtaposition between the content of the song (existential and religious crisis and the finality of death) and the audience’s joyful response to it draws attention to the treacherous ideological territory in which the insurgent spectacle operates.

²²⁵ Sater, introduction to *Spring Awakening*, x.

²²⁶ Some of Wedekind’s historical critics emphasize this aspect in the drama, but it appears intensified in the insurgent spectacle, making further argument for the Fortleben of *Frühlings Erwachen* in *Spring Awakening*. See Leroy R. Shaw, “The Strategy of Reformulation. Frank Wedekind’s *Frühlings Erwachen*” in *The Playwright and Historical Change* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1970), 57 for further discussion.

²²⁷ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 25.

The audience's overdetermined reaction to a high-energy pop song is at odds with the sobering content of the song: There is no God, no reward, and no second chance.

Melchior's existential realization is opposed at every turn by the naturalized institutions in the play. Though "The Bitch of Living" unfolds in the schoolhouse, the children are also subject to repression and torment at home. Moritz's parents expose the systems they apparently hold dearer than their child when he reports his failure in school to them. His father wonders aloud how Frau Stiefel can face the Missionary Society, how they can go to Church, how he can show his face at the Bank, after word of Moritz's failure reaches the wider community.²²⁸ This scene makes clear that, beyond educational and moral worries, there are far-reaching social and economic consequences for the children's actions. They cannot act independently of the systems of control to which their lives have been subjected. Wendla and Melchior touch on the influence of the economy briefly when they reminisce about the importance of their charity work with local day-laborers' children:

Wendla: What other hope do those people have?

Melchior: I don't know, exactly. But I fear that Industry is fast determining itself firmly against them.

Wendla: Against us all, then... It seems to me: what serves *each* of us best is what serves *all* of us best.²²⁹

Sater further develops these characters and the physical costs of their social system here, using Melchior and Wendla's chance meeting as the impetus for "The Word of Your Body," and he reveals Melchior as a cynical Marxist and underscores Wendla's hopeful naïveté while showing the adolescents' growing awareness not only of themselves, but of the world around them.

²²⁸ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 51.

²²⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 38.

The economy becomes important for Moritz when he decides he will escape to America rather than face failure at home, and asks Frau Gabor for money to flee. She condescendingly rebuffs his request.²³⁰ She does not say that she cannot afford it, or that she is sorry, but simply entreats Moritz to work within the confines of their social structure for salvation. This denial sends Moritz over the edge. In “And Then There Were None,” Moritz and Frau Gabor appear alternately spotlighted, Moritz in the style of a front-man for a rock band with neon red back light and bright white light overhead. The song begins with eighth note guitar and a driving beat, which builds as Moritz sings.²³¹ The other boys join Moritz as the song develops, and it becomes a choral anthem until the last verse. Moritz then screams out by himself, as he, per the stage directions, “commands his post-punk space:”

Just fuck it—right? Enough. That’s it.

You’ll still go on. Well, for a bit.

Another day of utter shit—

and then there were none.²³²

He then drops the microphone into a blackout. The music, which evokes punk rock and its anti-social, self-destructive tendencies, works with Moritz’s obscenity to highlight in neon and bright spotlights the intensity of his suffering and his proximity to suicide. The audience’s cheering and applause again raises the complicated relationship between spectacle as entertainment and spectacle as political theater.

These dramas and crises rise to a cynical crescendo in the insurgent spectacle with “Totally Fucked,” which gives modern voice to the adolescent’s angst and generational anger

²³⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 52.

²³¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 52.

²³² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 55.

and rebellion. This final youthful expression of rage and disappointment (albeit with a dash of laconic humor) laments: “Yeah, you’re fucked all right—and all for spite. You can kiss your sorry ass good-bye. Totally fucked. Will they mess you up? Well, you know they’re gonna try.”²³³ The song is in the style of alternative rock, starting with “a dirty electric guitar chord,” and ending in pandemonium on stage, with the entire cast and some of the orchestra dancing out of synch and out of rhythm as blue, white, red and golden lights flash and cycle psychedelically, the cast repeating “blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa” in their ecstatic throes until, in unison, they shout together “Totally fucked!” and all the lights go black.²³⁴ In the darkness, the performance was met with wild applause that spilled over into the next scene, even as the lights shift and the actors try to move the plot forward. What follows this orgiastic rock and roll expression in quick succession are Wendla’s abortion and death, Melchior’s brief but tumultuous stay in the reformatory, and Moritz’s suicide.

Moritz’s and Wendla’s deaths are certainly the drama’s most traumatic events, and Mayer and Sater takes nearly 30 minutes of stage time and 20 pages of script (from “And Then There Were None” to his death) to bring about Moritz’s suicide, extending the production’s dramatic tension.²³⁵ Moritz finds himself subjected to the myriad troubles adolescence provides those who experience it, and he cannot bear up under the pressure. His sunset meeting with Ilse is his last chance for life and all of its attendant pleasures. Moritz misses this chance and laments, “For the love of God, all I had to do was say yes.”²³⁶ The song “Don’t Do Sadness,” which Moritz sings as he prepares to kill himself, and which he later reprises in a duet with Ilse, who sings “Blue Wind,” add more emotional substance to their very brief and awkward dialogue,

²³³ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 74-6.

²³⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 76.

²³⁵ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 53, 55, 70, 72.

²³⁶ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 70.

as well as underscore the aesthetic shift from passionate reds to contemplative blues.²³⁷ The musical attitudes and lights for the two songs conflict. Moritz's song is performed in a garage band style and lit in harsh red and orange neon, while a plaintive guitar and a soft blue spot light accompany Ilse's song. As the two sing their duet, they are lit together before the bright white concert light fades entirely and Moritz makes his final, fatal decision.²³⁸

In "Left Behind," which Melchior performs at Moritz's graveside, the dramatic role of the theater's technical apparatus is on full display.²³⁹ The center of the stage, which moments before served as the hot, warmly-lit and gently swaying location for Melchior and Wendla's rendezvous, becomes Moritz's open grave, the panel pulled upstage and lit in dappled blue-white light, the hole of the grave black next to the single spotlight that illuminates Melchior. In the most obvious expression of the "interiority" the songs in the spectacle are intended to fulfill, Melchior sings, "giving voice to Herr Stiefel's inner thoughts."²⁴⁰ "Left Behind" is a mournful eulogy whose refrain draws on the shifting dappled light on stage:

A shadow passed. A shadow passed,
Yearning, yearning for the fool it called home.²⁴¹

After he and Wendla succumb to their adolescent failure, only Melchior, the third major dramatic figure, remains. He, too, suffers under the burden of adolescence, although with admittedly more resolve than Moritz and more clarity than Wendla. In the graveyard, waiting for his clandestine rendezvous with Wendla, he visits Moritz's grave and then stumbles upon hers. In his shock and disbelief he, too, contemplates suicide, but with the help of the spirits of Moritz

²³⁷ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 66, 68.

²³⁸ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 69.

²³⁹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 71.

²⁴⁰ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 70.

²⁴¹ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 71.

and Wendla, who appear as if raised from the grave, he chooses to live, even if he only has the memory of his friends and the promise of a future, however bleak, to motivate him.²⁴² In place of Wedekind's Masked Gentleman, Sater and Sheik use Melchior's "Those You've Known" to justify his survival and perseverance.²⁴³ Rather than succumb to despair, Melchior resolves to continue the course he set forth for himself in the beginning of the play, in "All That's Known." In his final individual lines on stage he sings:

I'll walk now with them [Moritz and Wendla].
I'll call on their names,
I'll see their thoughts are known.
Not gone—
Not gone—
I'll never let them go [...]
You watch me
Just watch me,
I'm calling,
I'm calling—
And one day all will know.²⁴⁴

In "Left Behind" and "All That's Known" in particular, Sater's lyrics and Mayer's staging cement the relationship between blue and white lights on stage and death in the mouths of the characters (and by proxy, a persistent reinforcement of mortality.) The white spotlights set the singer apart from the other actors on stage, as well as denote moments of interiority, but more than that, they reinforce the existence and validity of the intellectual and emotional lives of these characters—the life of the mind—and the threats and challenges they face. Not just students or parishioners or offspring, these characters strive to be fully-formed subjects outside of the naturalized institutions in which they find themselves. Sater and Mayer attempt a kind of dramatic synthesis, hoping to offer audiences something new by emphasizing juxtaposed

²⁴² Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 91-2.

²⁴³ Sater, introduction to *Spring Awakening*, xi and Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 91.

²⁴⁴ Sater, *Spring Awakening*, 92.

thematic elements (sex and death) with equally juxtaposed aesthetic choices. In Melchior, the recognition of mortality and suffering and the passion of youth coexist and work together in a character that is both critical of and sensitive to his milieu.

Insurgency, not Revolution: Capitalism Co-opts the Insurgent Spectacle

Melchior's hopeful and future-looking gaze is maintained in large part throughout the spectacle's criticism. *Spring Awakening*, in its Broadway musical form, is not looking backward to historical productions of *Frühlings Erwachen* and trying to maintain a still-life portrait of it. Rather, as critic Charles Isherwood remarks, "Broadway, with its often puerile sophistication and its sterile romanticism, may never be the same."²⁴⁵ With that said, the musical's critics ignore in large part the history of Wedekind's disjointed tragicomedy, and instead insist on tropes found in more familiar Broadway fare. One critic laments that the structure of the play "does little to move the story forward—forcing the focus, instead, onto the characters, who are generally difficult to care about and nearly impossible to connect with [. . .] Like the adults in *Spring Awakening* (played collectively by Kate Burton and Glenn Fleshler), I felt completely alienated from the very characters whose plights were meant to drive the drama."²⁴⁶ Within the roughly 120 year critical history of *Spring Awakening* is ample evidence to show that both the loose progression of scenes and the feeling of alienation from the characters, both adolescent and adult, are parts of the drama's identity, not a failing of Sater's and Mayer's production. Furthermore, it is precisely this lack of plot-driven momentum that gives audiences the opportunity to develop the intellectual energy and space to take in the ways the insurgent spectacle programmatically undermines the neoliberal politics of many of its contemporary productions on Broadway.

²⁴⁵ Isherwood, "Sex and Rock."

²⁴⁶ Lodge, "Spring Awakening," 461.

The play's critical history confirms its contentious social role, but it only hints at the effects the play did and continues to have on the theatrical institution. Sater's *Spring Awakening* was never designed to make much money, in fact, all of the principle participants assumed it would be a simple vanity project, an artistic expression ignored and forgotten.²⁴⁷ Instead, it won eight Tony Awards and additional accolades in London.²⁴⁸ As a testament to the show's sense of collaboration and community, as well as the financial resources it both required and received, thirty-six producers were onstage to accept the Best Musical award.²⁴⁹ Critic David Rooney remarks laconically on just this economic aspect when he writes, "*Spring Awakening* has an authenticity that connects the show directly to the generation being depicted. Getting that generation—not a prime theatergoing demographic—to pay Broadway prices will be the major marketing challenge."²⁵⁰ From the play's success, it is clear that the play met that major marketing challenge with some aplomb, although it is difficult to distinguish about which aspects of *Spring Awakening* audiences were most excited: its subversive politics, its "shock value," or its high-energy soundtrack. Even the insurgent spectacle is not immune to the pitfalls of the pop concert.

Despite the dangers of operating in the dangerous territory of the neoliberal spectacle, the insurgent spectacle *Spring Awakening* undermines the narrative of the triumph of order and regular growth pushed by the neoliberal spectacles of corporate entertainment by highlighting the emotional and intellectual chaos of its subjects. The dangers to which the children in the insurgent spectacle are subject and to which they succumb call into question the supremacy and ultimate good of the myriad systems of power and ideology in which they find themselves. This

²⁴⁷ Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 20-1.

²⁴⁸ Forsyth, introduction, xxxvi and Kenrick, *Musical Theater*, 378.

²⁴⁹ Kenrick, *Musical Theater*, 378.

²⁵⁰ Rooney, "Spring Awakening."

subversive political agenda, coupled with overwhelming economic and critical success, makes *Spring Awakening* the hallmark of the insurgent spectacle: an artistic production that is subversive *and* entertaining, innovative *and* sensitive to the histories of its subject. This spectacle paves the way for *Woyzeck*, *Mother Courage*, and others to take up their roles in resisting the politics and aesthetics of the neoliberal spectacle.

Critic Ian MacBey voices the potential change in theater that *Spring Awakening* engendered when he notes that, contrary to what “is assumed the public requires [...]—something safe, comfortable, and requiring no effort to enjoy, [...] there are signs that this tide may be turning [...] There may be a renaissance of new talent and original shows on the horizon.”²⁵¹ The burgeoning of *Spring Awakening* in the history of musical theater puts the production in a position not unlike that of its characters. Some critics find it adolescent, still grappling with the possibilities it contains, and filled with a general sense of angst and generational displeasure.²⁵² Inasmuch as the play represents an enormous, unbridgeable gap between grown-ups and the innocent young, it can seem outdated, especially, as one critic notes, when one sits in the audience surrounded by children and parents who are, in terms of fashion and attitude, indistinguishable from one another. However, in spite of the perhaps forced alienation and the vague nostalgia for an era of free love the play inevitably recalls, Wendla’s pregnancy makes the drama more immediate and pointed. With that, *Spring Awakening* “suddenly achieves its timeliness, staking out a position in reproductive-rights debates in the current divisive climate. Without didacticism, it becomes advocacy theater [...] ‘Spring

²⁵¹ Green, *Broadway Musicals*, xvii-xviii.

²⁵² Isherwood, “Sex and Rock,” and Gardner, “Sexual ‘Awakening.’”

Awakening' asks its audience to consider the perils of an insidious kind of sexual conservatism."²⁵³

This last insight is the key to *Spring Awakening*'s success. Despite perceived weaknesses and dramatic failings that critics have pointed to since its first publication, the text, in its various forms, continues to engage audiences in their particular cultural contexts.²⁵⁴ With each new imagining, both producers and audiences respond to the call for criticism and self-awareness that is at the center of the play. It is this aspect of the insurgent spectacle, alongside the renewed vitality of the Broadway show, that critics laud most highly, despite the wide variety of reservations about the show that some of them maintain. Even theater, it would seem, cannot escape the trauma of adolescence, although Sater and Sheik's *Spring Awakening* seems to have thrived in spite of it, as critic Peter Marks interprets the musical's particular brand of teenage melancholy as "the sweet sounds of the future."²⁵⁵ How do "the sweet sounds of the future" comprise part of the spectacle that is *Spring Awakening*? Marks' laudatory assertion puts director Michael Mayer's production into the realm of the ahistorical. The-future-is-now attitude prevalent in much of the production's criticism glosses over the structure of the performance and how its disparate parts—Wedekind's/Sater's text, the rock concert, and the venue in which the two meet—function as a politically active spectacle.

²⁵³ Bellafante, "Sex, Repressed and Unleashed," E1.

²⁵⁴ Hahn, "Frank Wedekind," 27, Gittleman, *Frank Wedekind*, 46, and Best, *Frank Wedekind*, 64.

²⁵⁵ Marks, "The Promise of 'Spring.'"

Chapter 3

Cirque du Woyzeck: Gísli Örn Gardarsson's Brutal Circus and Political Theater

On May 21, 1979, *Der Spiegel* scathingly reviewed Werner Herzog's film *Woyzeck* as derivative, lazy, uninspired: "Nachdem [Herzog] eben noch mit Klaus Kinski *Nosferatu* gedreht hatte, schien sich der Regisseur zu sagen: Der Kinski ist noch da, die Kamera noch warm, machen wir gleich zusammen noch, in einem Aufwasch, den *Woyzeck*."²⁵⁶ The one thing that saved the film: Kinski, with his unerring portrayal of Woyzeck as defenseless, as wavering between voiceless and unheard, and, finally, as inexorably brutal. Karasek's harsh critique of Herzog's *Woyzeck* as recycled and poorly conceived has, incidentally, also been leveled at director Gísli Örn Gardarsson's spectacular 2008 stage version of *Woyzeck*.²⁵⁷ However, where Herzog's *Woyzeck* is notable primarily for its brutality, Gardarsson's adaptation uses that brutality as a spring board to launch his carnivalesque insurgent spectacle. The rock musician Nick Cave, front-man for *The Bad Seeds*, who would later write the music for Gardarsson's production, remembers that brutality: "I have the Herzog version burned in my mind, pretty much," he said. "That's an extraordinary thing. It's so brutal. This version is very, kind of, festive. It's very different, a complete surprise — physical and youthful and virile."²⁵⁸ Gardarsson adds to the drama's well-established brutality an acrobatic and carnival festivity that, while it may grate on the aesthetic sensibilities of some critics, still provides powerful moments of juxtaposition, self-reflective commentary, and surprising humor that allow this production's unique political and aesthetic freedom. Gardarsson notes, "I often get accused of putting too much fun in my productions, but I don't know if that's really a negative criticism. What I always

²⁵⁶ Karasek, "Film: Auf Stichwort."

²⁵⁷ Johnson, "COLLAPSE and RENEWAL", 12-20.

²⁵⁸ Parales, "Shaking up 'Woyzeck.'"

love is that there's big contrast. One second we're in the biggest drama ever, the next second we're in the biggest entertainment ever, so you go on a roller coaster with your feelings."²⁵⁹ This alienating contrast results from the kinetic and kaleidoscopic staging of a sober drama and Cave and fellow *Bad Seed* Warren Ellis's music: some of the play's most brutal action is accompanied by "the most beautiful, haunting, liquid sounds."²⁶⁰ Cave remarks that he has "always enjoyed lulling the audience into a false sense of security."²⁶¹ The "false sense of security" is the production's central critical device, as it transforms the play into an emotional and sensory carnival show, in which, at any moment, the audience may be tricked or surprised, and the actors may pillory their characters, even as they play them.

Like Sheik and Sater's *Spring Awakening* and Kushner and Wolfe's *Mother Courage and her Children*, this interpretation of *Woyzeck* as a brutal political circus exemplifies the insurgent spectacle. As in these other productions, it offers moments of sharp political critique and violent outbursts on stage with playful interludes that separate them. These outbursts and comic or absurd juxtapositions implicate and simultaneously distract the audience. This chapter examines this paradoxical admixture of distraction and accusation as a key example of this contemporary mode of spectacularity. First, it investigates the role of the physical apparatus of the theater in the production, because the theater space plays an integral role in the creation of the insurgent spectacle. Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* also aligns itself with other bawdy, violent pieces of political theater that have a tradition that can be traced back to the works of Shakespeare.²⁶² The spectacle's overt emphasis on the theater and theatricality highlight the relationship between actor and audience member, and the relationships between the actors. The interactions between

²⁵⁹ Parales, "Shaking up 'Woyzeck.'"

²⁶⁰ Parales, "Shaking up 'Woyzeck.'"

²⁶¹ Parales, "Shaking up 'Woyzeck.'"

²⁶² Neuhuber, "Georg Büchner" 11:160, and Johnson, "COLLAPSE and RENEWAL," 19.

the audience-spectator and the on-stage-witness “establish meta-theatrical performance features” that reveal the mechanics of the spectacle.²⁶³ These mechanics, specifically, are amalgams of staging, textual drama, and music that represent a focused political program designed to both entertain and unsettle the audience. An analysis of the spectacle’s carnivalesque and musical elements and how they support its progressive, anti-neoliberal politics underscores *Woyzeck*’s subversive playfulness. The spectacle’s masquerade of silliness and farce, of fun and distraction, disarms the viewer and hides the production’s controversial politics, until—suddenly—the camouflage is pulled back and the insurgent spectacle doubly confronts and implicates the audience: with the politics of the production, and with the beliefs of middle class theater goers.

As with *Spring Awakening* and *Mother Courage and her Children*, this production uses the trappings of consumerist, pulpy Broadway spectacles, but in a way that both articulates and assumes a greater possibility of individual political agency. Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* follows in the tradition of Bakhtin’s ideas on carnivalesque performance, which mocks and harangues the stiff seriousness of a play that has a reputation for avant-garde treatments and elitism, even as it smuggles those same progressive politics into its comic, carnival staging.²⁶⁴ For Bakhtin, the “carnavalesque” is an aspect of the medieval celebration known as carnival that can be applied more broadly to literature. Carnival is “the period of ‘licensed misrule’ in which ordinary citizens could mock and defame the acknowledged authorities of church and state.”²⁶⁵ Carnival and its literary extension, the carnivalesque, is a kind of public and participatory theater, “in which everyone participates through pageants, parades, and spectacles.”²⁶⁶ Crucial to *Woyzeck* as insurgent spectacle, “the carnival undermines the concept of authoritative utterance and indulges

²⁶³ Rokem, “Witnessing Woyzeck,” 31:2-3:170.

²⁶⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, 165-6.

²⁶⁵ *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, “Carnival/carnavalesque.”

²⁶⁶ *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, “Carnival/carnavalesque.”

in the rituals of crowning and de-crowning of fools, mockery of all and sundry, foul language, the energetic utterance of nonsense, and the degrading of everything usually held as noble or sacred.”²⁶⁷ *Woyzeck* partakes in this literary strategy by allowing for, even encouraging, the mockery of a wide range of characters who represent or are agents of entrenched seats of power: the State, the Church, the military-industrial complex, and financial and technological institutions of all kinds.

The Vesturport Theater staged this foul-mouthed, mocking spectacle for the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival in 2008. Gardarsson pieced together Georg Büchner’s fragmented scenes into the story of an everyman driven to psychological turmoil and murder by the hopelessness of his social situation. A version of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*—the play itself is divided into 4 distinct drafts and was never completed—was first published 13 years after his death. The manuscript chronicles the tribulations and eventual downfall of a soldier, Franz Woyzeck, as he grapples with physical and psychological torments at the hands of his Captain and a doctor for whom he is a (poorly-paid) human laboratory, and emotional torments at the hands of his unfaithful wife, Marie, and her lover, the Drum Major. Gardarsson’s thematic approach to *Woyzeck* did not veer too far away from previous adaptations or interpretations, but his execution made a spectacle of Büchner’s document of human suffering. Continuing the tradition of previous adaptations to critique social injustices, Gardarsson updated Woyzeck’s military position as a lowly soldier to that of a minion in a water factory supervised by the sadistic Captain (Viingur Kristjánsson). The choice was a salient one, as Gardarsson framed the theme of the subjugation of the downtrodden with a more historically recent reference. Given Iceland’s state at the time of economic bankruptcy caused by poor financial management by both

²⁶⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, “Carnival/carnavalesque.”

the banks and the state, and the global economic and political insecurities of the time, especially the threats of climate change, the war in Iraq and the United States' global "War on Terror," Gardarsson's selection of the factory site—a vaguely defined "water factory"—for his production seemed an apt metaphor for the environmental pollution and exploitative capitalist systems with which *Woyzeck*'s international audience would be familiar. *Woyzeck* seeks moments of understanding and human connection in this increasingly alienating environment, and Gardarsson's direction complicates this search by mixing the comic with the tragic, the fantastic with the mundane.

The politically critical and carnivalesque aspects of this production emphasize those parts of 21st century bourgeois culture Gardarsson uses *Woyzeck* to interrogate. Critic Melisa Wong draws a general conclusion about the insurgent spectacle's political thrust: "Woyzeck, who seemed in some ways to be the most humane character in the production, was eventually the one who failed to survive. Our laughter might point to the complicity of individuals who, as part of society, had watched Woyzeck's life as entertainment without fully empathizing with the depth of his existential crisis. At the same time, Gardarsson's injection of levity into the play enabled us to access questions that in the bleakness of their full manifestation might have been too much to bear."²⁶⁸ Wong's summation of the production's politics echo Theodor Adorno's analysis of popular culture. Robert Witkin notes that for Adorno, "the world increasingly approximates to a machinery and all its citizens are trained operators [...] What is done to subjectivity through the medium of popular culture is [...] an index of what is done to subjects within modern society."²⁶⁹ In *Woyzeck*, Gardarsson and Cave attempt to reconnect audiences with an "authentic" artistic experience through the use of music and circus technique, even as they rely on images of

²⁶⁸ Wong, "Woyzeck," 638, 640.

²⁶⁹ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 14.

machinery to remind audiences of the mechanized and mediated systems by which they are surrounded. Again, per Adorno, the long-standing problem is that “Objectification and rationalization in social processes, generally, had their counterpart in the thoroughgoing rationalization and objectification’ of art. The modern artist, as heir to the domain of subjectivity and sensibility, found himself exiled from a society in which the rationality and instrumentalization of social relations had effectively separated him from any meaningful relationship to the praxis of everyday life.”²⁷⁰ Despite this pessimistic proclamation, however, the widespread impression that the Frankfurt School was dismissive of all popular culture, and its vital role to social life, is not quite accurate. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write:

The culture industry does retain a trace of something better in those features which bring it close to the circus, in the self-justifying and nonsensical skill of riders, acrobats and clowns, in the ‘defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art.’ But the refuges of a mindless artistry which represents what is human as opposed to the social mechanism are being relentlessly hunted down by a schematic reason which compels everything to prove its significance and effect. The consequence is that the nonsensical at the bottom disappears as utterly as the sense in works of art at the top.²⁷¹

And just as Adorno and Horkheimer argue that Enlightenment is engaged in and the result of mass deception, I argue that their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is intimately bound to Woyzeck’s predicament, and the critical political and social role that the insurgent spectacle can play in drawing attention to its structures and causes. While Enlightenment and Woyzeck’s tormenters claim to “provide the means for the emancipation of humanity from the obscurity of myth,” they “ultimately reveal [themselves] to be a more insidious manifestation of myth itself.”²⁷² The goal of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Richard Gray sees it, is also, as it appears in

²⁷⁰ Witkin, *Adorno*, 85.

²⁷¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 114.

²⁷² Gray, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment,” 79.

the insurgent spectacle, that of *Woyzeck*: to reflect critically on the “dogmatism of reason [...] with the goal of bringing Enlightenment to reflect on itself.”²⁷³ At this point, Gray implicates the audience, as does Gardarsson, who makes them complicit in the action unfolding on stage, and encourages them both to enjoy, uncritically, the spectacle on stage, and to view, through “the gaze of dramatic spectatorship” the consequences of “reason” and “enlightenment.”²⁷⁴ I argue, in short, that, through a brutally violent, circus-like theatricality, Gardarsson’s staging of *Woyzeck* questions and complicates the notion that the mass cultural spectacle cannot be an effective vehicle for politics. As an insurgent spectacle, and in its Benjaminian *Fortleben* that continues and adds vitality to Büchner’s dramatic tradition, *Woyzeck* accomplishes what its titular character could not: it raises contemporary audiences’ awareness of the myriad injustices and systematic abuses to which they are subjected: disenfranchisement, whether social or economic, exploitation by physical and economic means, and finally the violent control of both the body and natural resources by institutions and forces beyond individual influence.

In the discussion of mass culture, and the temptation to approximate culture to a machine and audiences to its passive consumers and servants, it is useful to draw on Dennis Kennedy’s idea of “assisting at the spectacle,” a play on the literal rendering of the French *assister au spectacle*, which intends not only the simple idea of ‘being present at a performance,’ but also brings to mind the idea of the spectator as an active participant, in fact assisting in the creation of the event.²⁷⁵ The spectator, as Kennedy and many others admit, is a thorny problem to tackle, and as a result, it is often necessary to rely on historiographies, reviews, and other criticism to develop an idea of how an “audience” views a work, or a particular performance. *Woyzeck*, as a

²⁷³ Gray, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment,” 81.

²⁷⁴ Gray, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment,” 84-5.

²⁷⁵ Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle*, 5.

document, further compounds this issue: throughout its long history, the text has changed seemingly constantly, its meaning, social and political goals—even content—shifting with the winds of political, editorial, and scholarly change.²⁷⁶ Similar to, but more deliberately than, *Spring Awakening*, the insurgent spectacle of Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* makes use of many of the historically important dramatic and political elements of the play alongside aesthetic innovation to propagate political and social awareness and criticism.

Building the Tent for Woyzeck's Circus

The sites of the circus and the musical, either the tent or stage, have been historically important not only as spaces for their respective performances, but as part of the spectacle. The circus tent's importance stems not only from the obvious practicality of being able to move the structure, but also as a ritualistic cultural site, with promises of wonder “under the big top.”²⁷⁷ The culturally privileged role of the stage as the ritualistic site of drama and spectacle has a long history, but Hollywood musicals, rather than the circus, provide the most glaring examples of making a “spectacular retreat” into interior (both physical and psychological) spaces as a response to social and economic crisis, a retreat which Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* refuses to make.²⁷⁸ The musicals of the 1930's offered an escape route from the hardships of the Depression. In them, the “play of romance, comedy, music, and dancing would inhabit the architectural extravaganza of imaginary worlds.”²⁷⁹ The rise and popularity of the modern acrobatic circus spectacular, especially shows like *Cirque du Soleil*, have obviously influenced performances across the theatrical spectrum. Theaters are essentially “big empty spaces,” and it “takes a lot of

²⁷⁶ Neuhuber, “Georg Büchner: Das literarische Werk.”

²⁷⁷ Arrighi, “The Circus and Modernity,” 172.

²⁷⁸ Mazumdar, “Spectacle and Death,” 406.

²⁷⁹ Mazumdar, “The Circus and Modernity,” 406.

color and activity to fill them.”²⁸⁰ The costumes, lighting, and set pieces need to fill the space and engage the audience so that they are not watching a performance but immersed and involved in the creation of art. Spontaneity on stage, whether real or manufactured, brings the images, words, and music of the work together and demonstrates “what one set of sensory organs can do to another.”²⁸¹

Woyzeck forgoes the “Big White Set” of the first big production musicals and those of their descendants on 21st Century Broadway (*The Lion King* and *Spider Man*, for instance,) which were famous for their size and opulence, and instead evokes a critical mood and makes a progressive political statement.²⁸² Unlike the Depression-era musicals that served as escapes from crisis, like *42nd Street*, *Woyzeck*’s set invites the audience into crisis. The large space is not unified; rather, it is dominated by a waterworks, and the sometimes down-trodden, sometimes slap-stick way in which the actors engage this machinery is reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* or Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. The machinery imposes itself on the actors, who, in all of their tumbling, leaping, and flying, are forced to negotiate this inhuman and inhumane environment. By moving through and inhabiting the space of the theater, the actors bring a “greater intensity [to the drama] than mere talkers and walkers.”²⁸³ This greater intensity “enchants” the space, makes it spectacular, and as a result, it directly supports the progressive political drama in a way unique to the insurgent spectacle.²⁸⁴ The set of *Woyzeck*, unlike the sets of the earlier Hollywood musical spectacles, does not distract and mollify the audience. Rather, it engages them as active observers and allows the actors to nonverbally communicate the play’s

²⁸⁰ Albrecht, *The Contemporary Circus*, 53.

²⁸¹ Albrecht, *The Contemporary Circus*, 70.

²⁸² Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema*, 119.

²⁸³ Mazumdar, “The Circus and Modernity,” 407.

²⁸⁴ Mazumdar, “The Circus and Modernity,” 407.

political thrust: that the machine of state—of money and power—is broken, and that there is no one to fix it.

To show how the machine breaks down, though, it first needed to be built. Executive producer Joe Melillo oversaw the development of the production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) Next Wave Festival. Some of the technical challenges the team faced were a bungee-jumping actor who also swings from a trapeze, a tank of water running around a raised section of custom steel decks, and on stage, a framework of PVC pipe. The span of the truss over the audience is 72 feet, requiring supports in the side boxes and three points to the steel above.²⁸⁵ So in effect, the building itself supports the weight of the actor's fall. The framework of pipes and trusses in which the actors move and to which they are often confined in their roles as factory workers, calls to mind Max Weber's description of the space of daily life, particularly under capitalism, as an "iron cage" (or "shell as hard as steel") of machinelike rationality.²⁸⁶ It also draws on the imagery of Fordism or Taylorism, famously found and used to political effect in the works of Chaplin and Lang. The trappings of industry that constitute the set remind audiences of their position in a capitalist metropolis. This doubling of setting—an urban-industrial spectacle critical of U.S. capitalism and foreign policy played in the U.S.'s urban cultural capital and ground zero for the "War on Terror"—couples with the Entertainer's explicit engagement of the audience and incorporates them into the spectacle and makes them, willingly or not, part of the insurgency. *Woyzeck*'s role as complicit in or opposed to the machinations of everyday capitalist existence is no clearer and no closer to being resolved than those of the theater and audience.²⁸⁷ If that is true, it does not mean that the investigation of these spectacles,

²⁸⁵ Lampert-Greaux, "Bungees for *Woyzeck*."

²⁸⁶ Baehr, "The 'Iron Cage,'" 153-169.

²⁸⁷ Prakash, introduction, 12.

like the investigation of public spaces and the people that fill them, is fruitless. The content and structure of the spectacle is as important as its political goals and effects, since the innovative formal and aesthetic techniques are the delivery vehicle for those politic.

With that in mind, the details of the complex set design and its uses are worth noting. The spectacle is and has historically been diminished if the set does not reflect the purpose of the action, which should be to awe the audience through size, force, and innovation. Arrighi notes: “The circus was going from strength to strength on the back of an increasingly industrialized nation [...]. Mirroring the increasingly complex and technological society it was playing to, the circus’s acts were also developing abreast of new advances in apparatus and human development. The complexity of circus skills was accelerating as a result of innovative new equipment and progress within human physicality.”²⁸⁸ Without great heights from which to fall, depths to plumb, and an appropriate venue for Cave’s rock concert, the Vesturport production becomes one more in a long series of mundane renditions of *Woyzeck*. The insurgent spectacle is only effective if the classic drama becomes vital.²⁸⁹

The technical apparatus heightens the characters’ defining attributes: drawing on Büchner’s drama as an investigation of the ways in which social, economic, and political institutions oppress and ensnare the individual, Gardarsson uses the set, staging, and music in concert with the drama to intensify the spectacle’s emotional and critical impact. *Woyzeck*’s production—long torture and humiliation at the hands of the Captain and the Doctor is less shocking without the instruments of torture—bowls and pools in which to drown him, ropes from which to hang him, and heights from which to kick him—made available by the set. Marie, *Woyzeck*’s lover and betrayer, cannot as effectively fulfill her dual role as Madonna and whore

²⁸⁸ Arrighi, “The Circus and Modernity,” 179.

²⁸⁹ Johnson, “COLLAPSE and RENEWAL,” 19, and Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1:256.

if she cannot trade in her drab and modest clothes for a skimpy Disney princess dress and swim sensually in the large tank. The Drum Major is not as grandiose without his aerial entrance, nor is the effect of his and Marie's love-making as crude and festive without the lurid glow of red lights and the jets of water that shoot into the air as they culminate their coupling. The Entertainer (new to the Vesterport production), without his lofty platform, cannot as effectively pass judgment on the action of the play, or, more importantly, the audience.

Like the circus, the independent theater—the traveling show—depends heavily on its spectacularity for its success: “the financial survival of their venues – and thus the continuance of their companies – depended upon the presentation of acts that were newer, harder, cleverer, more extreme, more gorgeous, and more technically complex than the previous year's programmes, or the programmes presented by competing managements.”²⁹⁰ The financial imperative of entertainment over accuracy, politics, or social change, goes a long way in explaining the mixed reviews Vesturport's production received. It also highlights the importance of parsing out the parts of the production that make it spectacular, not only to show how they may change the aesthetic or ethical impact of the work, but how they can, occasionally, make impactful social and political commentary in the face of those forces against which the work protests.

Witnessing the Event: Art, Play, and Violence as Political Tools

Gardarsson employs several novel techniques in this staging of *Woyzeck* that support its carnivalesque aesthetics, and seat it firmly within a dramatic tradition of bawdiness and debunking that both ally it with Bakhtin's subversive literary theory and with great historical

²⁹⁰ Arrighi, “The Circus and Modernity,” 177.

literary works, most notably those of Shakespeare.²⁹¹ Vesturport's production presents itself as self-justifying spectacle and act of social criticism by alloying its physical components (whether aerial acrobatics or brutal violence) with a Shakespearean subtext that runs throughout the performance.²⁹² Shakespearean themes play a pivotal role both in Büchner's historical work and this modern adaptation, from the murderous jealousy prevalent in *Othello*, to the image of the knife and indelible bloodstains (and subsequent need of washing off) that evokes *Macbeth*, to Hamlet's half-mad, truthful babble that audiences can find echoed in Woyzeck's pronouncements and hallucinatory conversations.²⁹³ Though Woyzeck drowns Marie in this production, the links between the two of them and bladed violence are several and obvious:

“He runs through the world like an open razor. You could cut yourself on him. Ah! He runs as though he's got a full factory of lawyers to shave, and he'll be hanged in fifteen minutes if there's a single hair remaining.”²⁹⁴

“He's stabbing me with his eyes! To be or not to be, that is the question...”²⁹⁵

“Stick a knife in me if you want to but don't lay your hand on mine.”²⁹⁶

Furthermore, the fear or (in Woyzeck's case) hope that the results of mortal or sexual sin are visible adds the necessary valences of guilt and ethical responsibility to the production that, were they absent, would rob *Woyzeck* of much of its impact.

The matter of Woyzeck's language, like that of Hamlet, is also the subject of much scholarly critical debate, but is mostly lacking in the criticism of Vesturport's production.²⁹⁷

Much of Woyzeck's speech resembles monologue: when he is at his most lucid, at the beginning

²⁹¹ Knowles, *Shakespeare and Carnival*.

²⁹² Johnson, “COLLAPSE and RENEWAL,” 20.

²⁹³ Neuhuber, “Georg Büchner,” 160.

²⁹⁴ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 41.

²⁹⁵ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 42.

²⁹⁶ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 51.

²⁹⁷ Neuhuber, “Georg Büchner,” 160.

of the play, his is able to converse with Marie, though only under the loosest definition of the term. “Something was there again,” he proclaims, without context, before running off to his next job.²⁹⁸ What was there? Presumably, the foundations of his murderous collapse. This relative lucidity can be contrasted with his ranting toward the end of the play: “Hey what—what did you say? Louder, louder. Shall I? Must I? I can still hear it, is the wind saying it too? I can still hear it, on and on, the water, drown her dead. No!”²⁹⁹ Woyzeck visibly and audibly struggles with his inexorable need to kill Marie.

Perhaps this insurgent spectacle’s greatest tie both to the idea of the carnival (whether literary, in Bakhtin, or actual, in the circus) and to the politically critical role that theater can play is the figure of the Entertainer. Given the play’s subject matter and the literary and historical fates of Woyzeck and his victim, it is fitting that the theme of the entertainment Woyzeck, Marie, and the Drum Major witness and in which they partake is death. The Entertainer plays, very explicitly, the traditional foil’s role of the court jester or bard: speaking truth where others might not. His role in the drama is delineated from those of the other characters in two important ways. First, his lines are sung, not spoken, already removing him somewhat from the diegetic space of the play, even though Woyzeck and Marie are meant to be at a carnival. Secondly, he and the choir with whom he sings are elevated above the stage on a platform, providing physical distance between the Entertainer and those he entertains. He exchanges knowing lines with a chorus that act both as commentary on the play as well as commentary to the audience, as the drama of the beginning of Marie and the Drum Major’s love affair—and Woyzeck’s discovery of it—play out on stage:

In this world we can’t abide,
We know we all must die

²⁹⁸ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 15.

²⁹⁹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 46.

Everybody knows why.
The chorus in turn responds,
Everybody knows
Everybody sees
That everybody dies
But me.

The chorus does not get the last word, however. That is reserved for the Entertainer.

Seemingly out of spite, and in fulfillment of his role as bard or jester (and therefore with a greater literary right to truth-telling), he repeats the chorus' last line as his own, and proclaims:

Everybody knows
And everyone agrees
That everybody dies
But me.³⁰⁰

This method of double communication—extradiegetically between the Entertainer and the audience and diegetically between him and the other characters—finds a more subtle expression in the several monologues, or stories, that various characters tell one another throughout the drama. Storytelling, casual violence, and play on stage critically subvert popular culture that seeks to justify this violence, and frame the more spectacular acrobatic and musical elements through which the production expresses its politics. *Woyzeck* opens with a scene of torture that would surely resonate to spectators at the time. The Doctor waterboards Woyzeck: she pours water from a platform above him onto his head and into a bowl he is struggling to drink from. Clearly, Gardarsson wants to immediately invoke the revulsion and outrage of the revelations in 2007 that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had tortured prisoners extrajudicially. Woyzeck chokes, splutters, retches, and continues to drink, as the flashlight

³⁰⁰ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 30-1.

beams of his coworkers at the water plant reveal “an unearthly, industrial setting” of “pipes, platforms, ropes.”³⁰¹ This opening *mélange* of theatrical and metatheatrical devices sets the tone for the rest of the spectacle.

Early in the production, Marie and Woyzeck meet and she establishes his existential fragility when she admonishes him: “You think too much, you look so hunted. It’ll wear you down one of these days.” Marie then tells Woyzeck a version of the Grandmother’s Tale from Büchner’s text. She tells him the story ostensibly to comfort him, but it is a story of disillusionment and betrayal:

Once there was a poor little kid who had no mother and no father. Everything was dead and the kid went out and searched day and night. And because there was no one left on earth, he decided to go up to heaven, ‘cos the moon looked down kindly on him, but when he reached the moon it was just a piece of rotten old wood. And then he went to the sun, but when he got there it was only a withered sunflower, and when he got to the stars they were only golden gnats that he birds had stuck to the blackthorn bushes, and when the kid came back down to earth again, the earth was just an upside-down old pot and the kid was all alone. Then he sat down and cried and he’s still sitting there right now, all alone.³⁰²

When Woyzeck asks her what it means, she simply replies, “You think too much.”³⁰³ The carnivalesque spectacle that Gardarsson creates is that of “witnessing” an event. Critic Freddie Rokem notes that, especially in *Woyzeck*, “This witness is part of the fictional world of the performance and the witness serves as a mirror image, a kind of filter or lens, or [focal point] for the real spectators watching the performance. [...] [This activity] is frequently doubled on the stage, within the performance itself, creating a fictional/theatrical mirror-situation of watching and viewing for the spectators in the auditorium.”³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 15.

³⁰² Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 24.

³⁰³ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 24.

³⁰⁴ Rokem, “Witnessing *Woyzeck*,” 168.

Woyzeck and the audience witness Marie recite this dense and de-contextualized parable. In his incomprehension, Woyzeck's question mirrors the audience's own. Marie's caution that Woyzeck and the witness think too much is both a warning and a plea: Don't try to understand, just experience. Where the production opens itself to criticism of being superficial or even bad is in these moments where sense seems to leave the stage. On the one hand, serious political critique requires a consistent rhetorical or aesthetic structure. On the other, part the political critique that *Woyzeck* makes is that the only response to the system under which it suffers is madness and violence, both of which lack any kind of consistency. So, despite the precarious rhetorical and aesthetic position of the production, Marie's seemingly random story-time is effective both as an alienation technique and a plot device: by bookending *The Grandmother's Tale* with "you think too much," Marie is telling Woyzeck's story. By scratching the surface of conditions of his existence, Woyzeck begins a journey that will both uncover the true and horrifying nature of his life and leave him in a position to do nothing but despair over it. Woyzeck's fate draws the audience into the moral, economic, and political mine field of the production, and this implication establishes the "meta-theatrical performance features" that reveal the mechanics of the spectacle.³⁰⁵ Marie's story, and Woyzeck's reaction to it, establishes a self-reflexivity that points to, "the manner in which the performance draws our attention to the theatrical medium as such."³⁰⁶ The mechanisms at work in the drama, both the physical and textual, "[transform] the passive theater-goer into an active spectator," by constantly refocusing the audience's attention on different aspects of the performance.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ Rokem, "Witnessing Woyzeck," 170.

³⁰⁶ Rokem, "Witnessing Woyzeck," 170.

³⁰⁷ Rokem, "Witnessing Woyzeck," 170.

This reading is reinforced first when the Drum Major delivers a version of the Tale as an address to a crowd and again later, at the end of the work, when Woyzeck recites another adaptation of it as a kind of benediction.³⁰⁸ The Drum Major uses the tale as propaganda, but also as the beginning of his seduction of Marie, regaling the workers in the factory with a story of how fruitless and empty life is under the sun:

Ladies and gentlemen. There once was an unlucky child and he had no father and no mother. Everything was dead and dry and there was nobody left in the world. Everything was rotten and the stench was unbearable. So he looked up at the sun, which stared at him with its fierce yellow eye. And the child was thirsty and dry, so he started to cry, but no tears came, so he cried and cried with eyes that were dry like rotten wood until at last he fell asleep. And he slept and slept, deeper and deeper, and never woke again. And there he lies still, all alone, rotting.³⁰⁹

Like the gathered crowd, the audience “witnesses” this dire proclamation, and, like them, also witnesses the Drum Major’s assurance that “Our beautiful project is succulent [...] We prosper! And so we celebrate.”³¹⁰ The Drum Major washes away the crowd’s anxiety, (again, the overwrought water theme is brought to bear) and he encourages them to dance, to revel, as opposed to consider the implications of his speech. Like Marie with Woyzeck, the Drum Major does not want his audience to understand, only experience: first fear, then relief and joy. The dark tale is a show: the boy’s utter decrepitude and isolation (and, by proxy, the crowd’s powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of market forces and climate change) are the fiction; wealth and prosperity are the reality. This fiction is simultaneously Gardarsson’s political and social critique of the kind of capitalism that destroys the environment and causes global financial collapse, and the pressure under which Woyzeck is driven mad.

³⁰⁸ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 35-6, 56-7.

³⁰⁹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 35-6

³¹⁰ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 36.

Once again, the text supports this analysis when Woyzeck recites his version of the tale as he washes Marie's corpse:

There once was a child and he had no mother and father. Everyone was dead and there was nobody left in the world. He looked up at the moon that shone down on him. It looked like a piece of rotten wood, or a bowl of blood, or a golden horn, or something like that. And the child stared up at the moon for days and nights. And the moon looked like a white tusk, or a glass slipper, or blood poured into a bedpan or a piece of wood that was dry and rotten, or something like that. And he started to laugh and it started to rain and he kept on laughing and it kept on raining, and he's sitting there, in the rain, under that moon, to this day.³¹¹

The three storytelling episodes denote the beginning, middle, and end of Woyzeck's destruction, and at each sign post, the audience is given the opportunity to stop and reflect, to witness his degradation. At these moments, the actors arrest their otherwise kinetic performances. The actors' lack of movement, the spotlights, the absent or spare musical accompaniment, all assist (or force) the audience to focus on these moments of loss. The audience is then further and finally implicated in the spectacle, as Woyzeck abandons his ablutions and screams at them: "What the hell do you want? You think I've killed someone? Am I a murderer? What are you staring at? Stare at yourselves! Go!"³¹² The last line of the play, before Woyzeck sinks irretrievably into the water, is a mad man's exhortation to be self-reflective. When he addresses the audience, he involves them in the action on stage, and takes an accusatory tone. Just as in Büchner's text, Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* holds the audience responsible.

³¹¹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 56-7.

³¹² Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 57.

A Musical Carnival: Subversive Politics as Entertainment

These representations of oppression and violence so central to Gardarsson's political critique would lose much of their shock value without juxtaposition to comic, silly elements.³¹³ While often accompanied by Cave and Ellis's music, these carnivalesque moments also occur at times in the spectacle when *Woyzeck* is at his most political. Early in the production, distracted by the pressure in his bladder and the storm brewing in his head, *Woyzeck* attempts to explain himself to the Captain: "We poor folk—do you see, sir, it's all money, money. If you haven't got it [...] you see, people like us don't have any virtue. We just live according to our nature. [...] It must be wonderful, virtue, sir. But I'm a poor fellow."³¹⁴ *Woyzeck* assumes a station eternally below that of his fellow characters. He also directly links "morality" with capital, and succinctly demonstrates the relationship between means and social convention, or the economic nature of social mores. The Captain and the Doctor take *Woyzeck* and their position of absolute power over him for granted. *Woyzeck*'s critique, then, is of the hypocrisy of those in power philosophizing to and moralizing with those without. In *Woyzeck*'s world, the dominance of capital is unquestionable. *Woyzeck*'s destruction is Gardarsson's critique of the policies of neoliberalism that created the geopolitical and financial climate out of which he was writing, and also of the neoliberal spectacle, which denies the negative effects of capital, even as it celebrates it.

After *Woyzeck*'s insights into his socio-economic condition, the Captain proclaims that *Woyzeck* is a good man, then throws him to the ground, and kicks him off the factory floor and onto the Astroturf of the exterior. As *Woyzeck* slowly recovers from the beating, the chorus of factory workers, lit with flashlights, sings at the command of the Captain. In this song, fresh on

³¹³ Wong, "Woyzeck," 638, 640.

³¹⁴ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 18-9.

the heels of the brutality and physicality of the Captain's attack on Woyzeck, the production reveals itself as a macabre circus. They sing:

Workers: O Captain you're a hero
There's nothing about you that's a zero
You're out great big wonderful Captain
You got tits like a hog and—
Captain: Oy!
Workers: We salute you!³¹⁵

This exchange between the factory workers and the Captain performs the carnivalesque relationship between the ruler and the ruled, the expression of dissatisfaction, even malice, within proscribed boundaries.³¹⁶ The chorus can disobey and mock the Captain, but only so much. The audience may laugh at the chorus's jabs, but in the end, the workers still salute the Captain. Like a pressure release valve, carnivalesque elements allow for dissent—but only so much. That realization is the seed of, the potential for, political change.³¹⁷ The following scene between Woyzeck and the Doctor continues the carnival mood and amplifies the stakes of social and economic hierarchical relationships, even as it undermines the powerful figure of the Doctor through farce and physical humor.

After his conversation with the Captain and his beating, Woyzeck recovers and can finally relieve himself on the grass. A hole in the Astroturf opens, and Woyzeck continues to piss on the Doctor.³¹⁸ She looks at the audience with frustration and disgust as urine runs down her face, foiling the waterboarding scene. She shouts at Woyzeck and then tumbles acrobatically from the hole, leaping to her feet to confront her embarrassed experimental subject. “Nature

³¹⁵ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 19-20.

³¹⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 157.

³¹⁷ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 157.

³¹⁸ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 20.

calls, nature calls! Have I not proved that the musculus constrictor vesicae can be controlled by the—” at this, the Doctor grabs Woyzeck’s genitals—“will? Nature!”³¹⁹

She then moves away from Woyzeck to pontificate at center stage: “Woyzeck, man is free! In mankind individuality expresses itself as freedom. [...] There is a revolution taking place in human knowledge; I’m going to blow it all sky-high.”³²⁰ With this proclamation, she contorts her face into a grimace that approximates a smile. She raises her arms stiffly in the air, ostensibly to indicate the enormity of her scientific revolution, but with obvious reference to the fascist salute. The Doctor becomes monstrous; she has her assistant restrain and strip Woyzeck, then she slaps his face for being unable to produce anymore urine. This rapid vacillation between scatological, sexual farce and violence, between play and critique, continues the spectacle’s previously-established aesthetic program, but raises the political and emotional stakes. Woyzeck is not free. He is bio-power, raw material to be used up and exploited.

Woyzeck’s subjugation is then made explicit: the Doctor’s assistant and four other masked figures in hazmat suits appear upstage from the labyrinth of metal pipes, grab Woyzeck, tie him up, and hang him upside down from a rope as the Doctor continues to lecture Woyzeck, saying “Everything is under control. Anger is unhealthy, it’s unscientific. I am calm, quite calm, my pulse is at its usual sixty. God preserve us from getting angry about a man, a mere human being! If it had been a bacterium someone had killed! But you shouldn’t have pissed on the grass.”³²¹ The masked gang then gives Woyzeck a push, so that he swings by his feet above the stage and out over the audience. The Doctor’s focus on freedom and self-control is ironic. What Woyzeck is free to do, of course, is to obey the Doctor’s edicts unfailingly. Woyzeck is free to

³¹⁹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 21.

³²⁰ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 21.

³²¹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 21-2.

subject himself to her for meager financial gain; he is free to control himself, and in so doing, be controlled. The Doctor reveals “man’s inhumanity to man” in a humorous, but subtly terrifying, outburst.³²² In trying to control her temper, the Doctor relies on her “scientific” training to remain calm. She appears as a caricature of the scientific mind, lampooning the archetype of the scientist who, like Mengele, forgets humanity, forgets life, for the sake of progress.

As before with the Captain, in his humiliation, Woyzeck tries to define his condition:

Woyzeck: You see doctor, sometimes a man has a certain character, a certain structure. But with nature it’s a bit different, you see with nature, it’s like, how shall I say, for example—

Doctor: Woyzeck, you’re philosophizing again.

Woyzeck: Doctor, have you ever seen an example of a double nature? Sometimes when the sun’s at its highest in the middle of the day and it’s as if the whole world is on fire, a terrible voice has spoken to me!³²³

The multiple valences of signification in this scene: of hanging, of trapeze performance, of an animal caught in a trap, of meat hung for slaughter, contribute to and interfere with the conversation between Woyzeck and the Doctor. Woyzeck’s physical suffering speaks in way that he is incapable of vocalizing, and his apocalyptic premonitions cast a pall over the absurdity of his position.

The violence and absurd spectacle continue while Woyzeck is “philosophizing.” The Doctor climbs onto her assistant’s shoulders, produces a catheter from her sleeve, like a magician might pull a string of handkerchiefs, and takes a urine sample by force. Woyzeck screams in pain, but continues trying to explain the idea of a “double nature.” He screams again when the Doctor removes the catheter, and urine splashes on her face and in her eyes. The audience

³²² Burns, “Man was Made to Mourn,” 33.

³²³ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 22.

(which, unlike with *Spring Awakening* are not on stage or interspersed with cast members) bursts into (unscripted, spontaneous) laughter. She then, very literally, leaves him hanging. Once more, Gardarsson uses physical, and in this case, scatological humor, to underscore and contrast with the systemic and systematic violence under which Woyzeck suffers. The audience experiences Woyzeck's depredation in silence, but celebrates the Doctor's misfortune. They have, however temporarily, aligned themselves with the pitiful figure of Woyzeck. Their laughter makes way for true seriousness, which is the end goal of the carnivalesque.³²⁴

Later in the production, at a party, Woyzeck is again subject to the Doctor's sadistic whims, this time with the assistance of the Captain and Drum Major. Seeing the Drum Major's sexual designs on Marie, the Captain literally kicks Woyzeck out of the party and down onto a downstage platform, where the Doctor and her assistant quickly ensnare him. They put a bowl over his head and fill it quickly with water, so that "Woyzeck's head looks grotesquely large."³²⁵ The grotesque elements of the production, especially the way the other characters dehumanize Woyzeck, alienate him, make his degradation more acceptable to the audience, and in turn, make his moments of humanity more poignant.

At this point, the Sergeant delivers another of *Woyzeck's* historically famous soliloquies, made all the more urgent and ironic in its delivery because of the simultaneous torture Woyzeck suffers. As applied to the "volunteer" Woyzeck, the Sergeant's call for the audience to attend to the entertainment on stage is biting: "Despite its education, it has only bestial reasoning, or rather an entirely rational bestiality. It's not a stupid beast like many people revered by the general public. See here the creature God made out of nothing. Out of primæval slime. Look at the skill—stands upright, wears a jacket and trousers. [...] see the advance of civilisation.

³²⁴ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 156-8.

³²⁵ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 32.

Everything evolves—a horse, an ape, a canary. The ape is already a worker at our factory. And he’s seventy-five per cent water. It’s not much of course... Congratulations. You are the lowest form of humanity.”³²⁶ Here, Woyzeck can endure no more torture, and he collapses and pulls the bowl from his head, coughing and retching. The other characters retreat up-stage, back to the party, while Woyzeck is spot-lit, still suffering.

As a side-show attraction, a grotesque, Woyzeck allows Gardarsson to be sharply political. Woyzeck is aware enough to know he is the butt of a joke: he is poor, undesirable, under-developed—or, rather, over-exploited—and this condition, as the “lowest form of humanity,” makes him worthy of scorn, the same scorn shown by any number of bankers and hedge fund managers for those who lost their life savings, homes, retirement, college funds—the trappings and foundation of bourgeois life—in the Global Financial Crisis. By alienating the audience from the drama’s central figure, by torturing and debasing that person with whom the audience is ostensibly supposed to identify, Gardarsson draws them into both the horrors of the drama and of neoliberalism.

True to form, however, the spectacle allows little time to dwell on the far-reaching and acrimonious implications of its content. Woyzeck’s friend Andres attempts to comfort him, but in his shame and rage, Woyzeck attacks him. He screams “I have no peace!” and throws Andres to the ground.³²⁷ Andres escapes from Woyzeck up a rope, and Woyzeck pursues him, until he feels compelled to return to the party and go after Marie, complaining about the heat and exclaiming, “I’ve got to see!”³²⁸ Woyzeck then drops to the Astroturf and runs off stage-right, as

³²⁶ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 33.

³²⁷ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 34.

³²⁸ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 33.

Andres tangles himself in the rope, and tumbles to the floor in pursuit. His acrobatic fall elicits laughter from the audience, which relieves the tension of the earlier violence and exploitation.

The carnival atmosphere continues, as the Drum Major, while admitting the previous year has been full of hardships for the workers, proclaims that the factory has made enormous profits. As a reward, the down-stage Astroturf is pulled away to reveal a long pool tank. The Entertainer then throws an enormous blow-up ball (a globe) to the Captain, who plays “fetch” with the Drum Major, until the Drum Major tires of the game. He throws the globe into the audience, and the Captain chases after it as the audience members bat it back and forth. The black-suited members of the chorus then jump one by one, like lemmings, through a trap door in the stage floor, as the audience plays with the globe (as, presumably, Gardarsson sees America and Americans playing with the world) and the Drum Major continues his seduction of Marie uninterrupted. The intentional involvement of the audience in the machinations and games of the Drum Major and Captain explicitly implicate its members in the drama unfolding on the stage. They become part of the spectacle (by playing) and part and object of the political critique.

Woyzeck has by now stripped off his clothing, symbolically moving further away from the things that make him civilized, like “wearing a jacket and trousers.”³²⁹ He is harried by the Doctor and the Captain, and even his friend, Andres, has been drawn into their oppressive treatment of him, as he stands up to the Captain, saying “Captain, ugly Captain, you’re our big fat ugly Captain [...] and I don’t like you.”³³⁰ For his verbal abuse, the Captain strings Andres up to a bungee, and he hangs and swings above the stage and out over the audience, terrified. Woyzeck climbs up a hanging rope in his underwear, both to escape the Doctor and to get closer to Andres. He laments both his situation and his mental state:

³²⁹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 33.

³³⁰ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 46.

Woyzeck: This place is cursed, Andres.
Can you hear it? Something's moving. It's behind me, under me. [...] Do you hear?
Andres!
Andres: What!
Woyzeck: Say something.
Andres: I'm scared.³³¹

At that, the audience laughs. After Bakhtin, this laughter is not the goal of the spectacle: it is the first step, the pre-condition, for seriousness and criticism.³³² Bakhtin notes, "Carnivalization [...] proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism, at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into 'rotten cords' and the previously concealed, ambivalent and unfinalized nature of man and human *thought* was being nakedly exposed."³³³ These moments of un-prompted laughter reveal the political forces at work within the drama and between the drama and its audience. They are audible indicators of conflict.

Music and the Carnavalesque: a Soundtrack for the Absurd

Woyzeck's torture and subjugation at the hands of the Doctor, Captain, and Drum Major are horrifying, but they take on an element of absurdity with the addition of Nick Cave's musical accompaniment. The music of *Woyzeck* serves an integral role as part of the aesthetic program of both the carnival and alienating aspects of the production. The jarring introduction of musical interludes and song to the brutality performed on stage unsettles audience expectations and, per Gardarsson's design, takes them on an emotional "roller coaster."³³⁴ Their playful aspect seems

³³¹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 48-9.

³³² Beasley-Murray, 12-3.

³³³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 165-6.

³³⁴ Parales, "Shaking up 'Woyzeck.'"

absurd next to the hopelessness and darkness of the drama, but they also momentarily alienate the audience and confront them with the procedure of spectacle: distraction, light, noise, levity.

The workers' song to the Captain introduces the idea of music as subversion, but that political point becomes fully realized when Woyzeck employs song in a desperate attempt to keep Marie from leaving him. Accompanied by a motley crew of factory workers wielding a strange assortment of improvised instruments, Woyzeck professes his love for Marie:

And I know that life goes on, dear

And I know that you are the only one.

However, this serenade is full of tidings of Woyzeck's current and Marie's future misery:

O Marie O Marie

Life is full of trouble and woe

O Marie O Marie

It is everywhere you go [...] ³³⁵

The desperation of Woyzeck's serenade contrasts with the Drum Major's entrance into the spectacle. He arrives to "one, to, three, four," drums, and electric guitar. Woyzeck jumps at the loud music, and looks around—and up—in fear as he, Marie, and the assembled workers searches for the source of the noise. They spot the Drum Major high up in the light rigging, suspended from wires and riding a bungeed trapeze. This supernatural entrance establishes the Drum Major's powerful position in the drama—and how it is manufactured. This *deus ex machina*, rather than signal divine resolution to a conflict, signals Woyzeck's undoing. By way of introduction, the Drum Major swings and bounces above the stage, loudly proclaiming to a heavy rock beat:

³³⁵ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 25.

I am the Drum Major! [...]
I ride on the thunder!
I pound on my drum!
When I spin my big baton
All the little girls come! [...]
I am the Drum Major!
I like to hunt!
Pussy and Beaver
And wild English Cunt!³³⁶

The bawdiness and bravado of his entrance foil Woyzeck's pathetic ditty, and casts the Woyzeck-Drum Major rivalry as hopeless—for Woyzeck—caricature. The Drum Major's sense of humor, his double entendres and easy smile, make the violence and cruelty to which he subjects Woyzeck all the more shocking. The Drum Major's arrival sends the assembled factory workers into an uproar, and the hierarchy of power in the workplace quickly defines itself as the Captain genuflects to the Drum Major, even as he abuses the other workers, and especially Woyzeck, to make way for the new and powerful figure.

The Entertainer (new to this production of *Woyzeck*) enters the stage on the central elevated platform after the Captain tells Woyzeck to “piss off,” and he and Drum Major exit.³³⁷ He is dressed in a spangled white tuxedo reminiscent of an Elton John or late-Elvis costume, but too small, his belly popping out of a too-tight shirt and his scraggly beard hanging down over an open collar. He sits at a tiny piano fit for the Peanuts' character Schroeder and sings, in a raspy gospel fashion:

Entertainer: In this world we can't abide,
We know we all must die
Everybody knows why.
Chorus: Everybody knows
Everybody sees
That everybody dies
But me.³³⁸

³³⁶ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 26-7.

³³⁷ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 30.

³³⁸ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 30.

The song continues as Marie's betrayal of Woyzeck plays out below the Entertainer. Marie is wearing the "sexy Disney princess" dress that Woyzeck gave her after his serenade. He discovers that she has "found" roses, given to her by the drum Major while Woyzeck was off-stage. In the pregnant silence between the two lovers, the Entertainer reprises the chorus, insisting that "everybody dies" but him, and, with a flourish and hip swivel worthy of Elvis, gives the audience the finger. Woyzeck is incredulous, and embarrassed by his small bunch of wild flowers: "Real ones? I've never found one—you've found two at once." Ashamed, Marie replies, "Lucky me." She then throws the roses away. Woyzeck, in an act of forgiveness, picks up the roses and returns them to Marie.³³⁹ They hold hands and wait for the party to start, and once again, the Entertainer repeats the chorus, this time pausing to sigh in exasperation as the two lovers kiss. The constantly shifting focus of the spectacle, from the small drama between Marie and Woyzeck to the larger, meta-commentary and comedy of the Entertainer create intellectual space for the audience to reflect on what is being staged: a tongue-in-cheek mockery of love, an expression of frustration over human weakness, and a representation of the primacy of entertainment—over human relationships, over politics, over life.

The combination of musical and carnivalesque elements continues when the Drum Major seduces Marie. After the chorus of factory henchmen makes its stage exit through a trap door, the Drum Major drops the inflatable globe (symbolic of the power he has in the factory) into the hole after them. He then sprinkles water from the tank into the hole, and waving his hands over it like a magician, he smiles as two bunches of white roses "grow" from the globe and water. He snatches them up, and turns them over, revealing two hand-held microphones. He hands one to Marie, and they sweetly serenade one another:

³³⁹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 31.

Drum Major: I have swooned
To the blossoms that bloom
On the cherry trees [...]
But I've never seen anything half as sweet as you are.
Marie: I've watched a swan
Land so gently on
A lake of blue [...]
But I've never seen anything half as sweet as you are.³⁴⁰

At this, the Drum Major gestures to the ceiling, and a “swan”—a man in a white leotard and tutu, holding long white feathers in his hands, is lowered on wires from the rigging above the stage. He smiles widely and waves the feathers with the rhythm of the music. As the swan returns to his perch in the rigging, the Drum Major disrobes down to his underwear, and red and white roses attached to darts drop from the rigging above the stage and stick in the grass. Marie sinks to her knees, clutches her free hand between her thighs, and moans into the microphone:

I've prayed on my knees
O, love, tell me, please
Is that wrong to do?³⁴¹

Marie and the Drum Major continue to serenade one another and slowly work their way toward and then into the pool, as, finally, they get to the point:

Drum Major: I've had women aplenty and girls by the score
Marie: Did you love them and love them and love them some more?
Drum Major: Yes but I've never seen anything half as sweet as you.³⁴²

When they enter the pool, the water glows red as the stage lights fade and two spotlights find the lovers. They meet in the middle of the tank and make love, splashing in and over the side of the tank, pulling at one another's costumes. As they climax, jets of water shoot from the

³⁴⁰ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 37.

³⁴¹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 38.

³⁴² Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 38.

tank, and the Drum Major raises his arms above his head as if in victory, having finished a masterful performance.

As soon as the two lovers hop out of the pool, the carnivalesque musical spectacle continues as both the Doctor and the Captain are lampooned and their various weaknesses exposed to the audience and to one another. Cave's spare instrumental music sets a mood as the Doctor and her tutu-clad assistant (the swan in the preceding scene) come to the edge of the pool. She tests the water and begins to undress. Her assistant smiles and she slaps and blindfolds him to chuckles from the audience. She finishes disrobing, and slaps him again and his arms extend, as if they were spring-loaded, so she can use him as a coat hanger. As she dips her toe into the water, the Captain appears on the central platform, and calling to her, startles her into falling into the water. She splutters and splashes as the audience laughs, and then tries to swim away as the Captain attempts his seduction by requesting medical advice: "Don't race about so much. You're galloping to your death. Rush, rush. A good woman with a clear conscience doesn't tear about like that. A good woman. I'm so depressed, it's driving me mad. I keep crying. If I so much as see my coat hanging on the wall, just hanging there."³⁴³

Embarrassed by her fall and the unwanted attention from the Captain, the Doctor lashes out as her assistant re-dresses her: "You're bloated, greasy, thick neck, apoplectic constitution. Yes Captain, you're looking as an apoplexia cerebrialis. You might just get it on one side, though, and be partially paralysed, or you might be lucks and only be paralysed in the brain and just vegetate away quietly. That's the outlook for the next four weeks."³⁴⁴ As the Doctor delivers this terrible news, the Captain has descended a rope from him platform and taken the assistants position behind the Doctor, dressing her, smelling her hair, and smiling. His sexual interest is

³⁴³ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 38.

³⁴⁴ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 39.

evident. The Doctor continues, unaware, “I can assure you though that you’ll make one of the most interesting cases on record, and if God wills it and your tongue is partly paralysed, well, we’ll perform the most immortal experiments.”³⁴⁵

The Captain then shouts in the Doctor’s ear, “Doctor, don’t frighten me,” and the Doctor, frightened, jumps and tries to run from the Captain.³⁴⁶ He grabs her around the waist and holds her fast, the irony and threat of his next lines both obvious and comical: “People have died of fright, you know. Of sheer bloody fright. I can just see the mourners with lemons in their hands...”³⁴⁷ The Doctor struggles to escape the Captain’s grasp, and he finally relinquishes when the music changes and a chorus strikes up a song, reminiscent of a Gregorian chant, in his honor:

He was a good man!
Oh, yes! And now he’s gone!
He was a virtuous man!
Oh, yes! And now he’s gone!
He was a handsome man!³⁴⁸

While the chorus sings the praises of the Captain’s virtues, the Doctor flees his advances up a rope, and the Captain pursues her. He stands under the rope and spins the end of it, making the Doctor wheel through the air, hanging from the rope by only her hands, as she screams. Woyzeck intervenes on her behalf, and the Captain turns his attention to this new victim. The Doctor climbs down onto her assistant’s shoulders, her dress covers his face, and the two stumble dizzily off stage to laughter from the audience. The religious, funeral tone of the chorus’ song is at odds with the Captain’s sexism, false morality, and depravity and the Doctor’s cruelty. The blatant falseness and sycophancy of the lyrics and the irony of their delivery also reinforce the negative aspects of the Captain’s power. He behaves as badly and as foolishly as anyone else

³⁴⁵ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 39-40.

³⁴⁶ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 40.

³⁴⁷ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 40.

³⁴⁸ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 40.

in the drama, but rather than suffer any consequences, he is—superficially—lovingly eulogized. The music provides constant and often contradictory commentary on the spectacle. It complicates the superficiality and brutality of the absurd acrobatics and morally bankrupt drama on stage.

In his last humane act, that is, rescuing his tormentor the Doctor from his tormenter the Captain, Woyzeck opens himself up to his undoing. The Captain reveals Marie's infidelity to Woyzeck and subsequently tries to drown him, and Woyzeck begins the precipitous psychological downward spiral that will lead to murder. A white-clad violinist—a kind of grotesque angel—descends from the rigging above the stage and puts Woyzeck's predicament into context:

It can happen that a wanderer who stands leaning against the stream of time might challenge divine wisdom and ask himself: why does man exist? But verily I say unto you, how should the farmer, the cooper, the shoe maker, the doctor live, if God hadn't created mankind? How should the tailor make his living, if God hadn't planted in man a sense of shame? What would the soldier do, if God hadn't built into him the need to destroy himself? Therefore doubt not, yes, yes, everything's lovely and fine, but everything earthly is vain. Even money rots in the end. In conclusion, beloved listeners, let us piss on the cross so a Jew will die.³⁴⁹

This appropriation of the tavern soliloquy from Büchner's text, taken out of the mouth an apprentice in an inn and given divine provenance, is a powerful expression of the carnivalesque that undermines—because it reveals and questions—the naturalized institutions of capitalism, religion, and the State. In Gardarsson's *Woyzeck*, this pronouncement is delivered by a grotesque angel, rather than a member of the 19th century German underclass. In changing the messenger, the message, too, has changed. The soliloquy draws attention to the “natural” order of things: God created man in such a way that the institutions of the market economy (the farmer, cooper,

³⁴⁹ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 43-4.

and doctor), the nation-state (the soldier), and the Church that reflects on God's plan for humanity (as a result of his shame and wickedness) are all necessary to its continued existence, rather than, as *Woyzeck*'s circumstances clearly demonstrate, the means of its oppression and undoing. This scene is also a potent moment of interiority for *Woyzeck*. Following this soliloquy, *Woyzeck* complains, "When I close my eyes everything goes round and round, and I can hear fiddles, going on and on, and a voice speaks out of the walls. Can't you hear it?"³⁵⁰ *Woyzeck*'s dependence on those who constantly debase and objectify him strains him beyond the point where he can cope, and the surreal, carnivalesque moments in the production underscore his increasingly tenuous grasp on his sanity.

Carnival, Chaos, and the Tactics of the Insurgent Spectacle

The insurgent spectacle, like a military insurgency, is designed to incite chaos and unsettle prevailing order. Jeff Johnson criticizes *Woyzeck*, alongside *Romeo and Juliet* and other German classics that Vesturport has tackled—*Faust* and *The Metamorphosis*, and laments that "transforming canonical texts into a circus-style spectacle easily becomes redundant, and they risk merely repeating themselves instead of evolving in their approach. In their quest for the new, they visit the well once too often and originality dries up."³⁵¹ Though he is not alone in his criticism on this point,³⁵² Johnson admits that *Woyzeck*, being the first of these spectacles, contains the playful, "low" culture elements that, theoretically, give the carnival, the circus, and the theater their emotional and political power. In further circus fashion, the over-blown characters and physical action of the production are accompanied by music to help inform and

³⁵⁰ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 44.

³⁵¹ Johnson, "COLLAPSE and RENEWAL," 19.

³⁵² Sellars, "Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*"

guide the audience, whose attention may otherwise be too divided to successfully follow the story. Nick Cave's haunting score effectively expresses the Drum Major's rock machismo, the Captain's brutal, insipid weakness, Marie's vulnerability, and Woyzeck's persecution and desperation. If text is secondary, the "power of Büchner's language still shines through."³⁵³

The chaos that Gardarsson's *Woyzeck* incites stems from the inseparability of the "grotesque parade of society" that critics and audiences expect from *Woyzeck* with the "glitzy cartoon" of silliness, play, and irreverence.³⁵⁴ Where the insurgent spectacle succeeds, however, is precisely in this unsettling of expectation: Gardarsson's use of "gimmickry" simply underscores the thorny issue at the intersection of progressive politics and mass culture: "some elderly, idea-rich dramas go down more smoothly when presented in circus form."³⁵⁵ This revelation touches directly on the carnival, on the playful aspects of this play, and the important role they play in allowing subversion, criticism, mockery and expression of resistance, even if it is not entirely free. Indeed, the bawdiness which is a hallmark of carnival is nicely encapsulated by the Drum Major's entrance, who, by way of introduction, sings "I am the Drum Major! I like to hunt! Pussy and Beaver and wild English Cunt!"³⁵⁶ It is the compromise to entertainment, aptly demonstrated here, with which critics seem have a problem.³⁵⁷ There is always a danger that the "noise" of the circus, which are in fact the elements of the insurgent spectacle, will overwhelm the anticipated markers of high art for which Büchner's *Woyzeck* is famous: serious, dour deliberation of humanity's failings and the inescapability of failure and death.³⁵⁸

³⁵³ Billington, "Woyzeck."

³⁵⁴ Sellars, "Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*."

³⁵⁵ Thielman, "Woyzeck."

³⁵⁶ Gardarsson, *Woyzeck*, 31.

³⁵⁷ Sellars, "Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*," and Thielman, "Woyzeck."

³⁵⁸ Thielman, "Woyzeck."

However, when music and the carnivalesque elements of the spectacle are viewed as an aesthetic whole, it becomes clear that Nick Cave is a kind of ring-master for the production, his words and music providing context for the “extreme physicality” of the production.³⁵⁹ Karoline Gritzner claims that Büchner’s text “already envisions the inclusion of powerful musical elements,” and that Cave’s contributions create an atmosphere of “danger, violence, seduction, and hopeless longing.”³⁶⁰ His music orchestrates the action of the play, extra-diegetically drawing the audience’s attention to both the play’s most “authentic” and most theatrical moments.³⁶¹ She argues that the performance of Cave’s music produces an authenticity that “stems from its unpredictable, spontaneous occurrence as a meta-theatrical rupture of the plot development.”³⁶² In other words, the inclusion of a type of live rock-musical event within the events of the play comments upon and underlines what Gritzner sees as the play’s preoccupation with the “real.”³⁶³ The constructed (and spectacular) physical and temporal space of the theater space allows, with apparent contradiction, the expression of authentic political and social critique. Many of Vesturport’s critics, even the negative ones, make the point that, while much of the politically and socially critical thrust of the play is in some way present, it is covered up, disguised in the form of a kind of musical circus. I contend that this spectacle is precisely the method by which the audience can internalize, critique, or adopt the plays diverse commentary on capitalism, institutional and hegemonic violence, social justice, and humanity’s relationship with “nature.” The production reveals itself as more than its detractors would like to admit: it is a popular, economically viable piece of mass culture that encourages its audience to examine, even

³⁵⁹ Gritzner, “You Won’t Want the Moment to End,” 122.

³⁶⁰ Gritzner, “You Won’t Want the Moment to End,” 122.

³⁶¹ Gritzner, “You Won’t Want the Moment to End,” 126.

³⁶² Baker, *The Art of Nick Cave*, 126-27.

³⁶³ Baker, *The Art of Nick Cave*, 127.

resist, their social and political conditions. By allowing for distraction, disinterest, even detraction, this production of *Woyzeck* is able to undermine binaries of “high” and “low” culture that so many theater and literary critics are wont to uphold. In so doing, this work of art deliver its insurgent political, ethical, and aesthetic messages to a wide audience, something with which, I think, Büchner himself would have been pleased.

Chapter 4

(Culture) War Profiteering: Tony Kushner's *Mother Courage* and the Downfall of the Insurgent Spectacle

Nothing fills seats in a theater like movie stars under bright stage lights, and Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline were spectacular as the stars of Tony Kushner and George Wolfe's 2006 production of *Mother Courage and her Children*.³⁶⁴ Fawning over Streep's portrayal of Mother Courage at her shrewd, exploitative worst, Ben Brantley fawned, "[...] 'Mother Courage' should open for Ms. Streep the same future in advertising endorsements that awaits grand-slam sports champions. I, for one, would love to know what vitamins she takes and how to get them."³⁶⁵ Like the late 1980s McDonald's advertisement campaign that co-opted Bertolt Brecht's "Mack the Knife" to sell cheeseburgers and Coca-Cola products, the economic viability of Streep-doing-Brecht becomes clear from Brantley's review. But Streep wasn't just there to make money. Her inclusion and celebrity were central to Kushner's attempt to (re)popularize Brecht. Yet the ploy backfired, because Streep's uncritical presence as a celebrity taking a leading role in Brecht's revolutionary drama, as well as Kushner's own fame (he won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1993 play *Angels in America*), undermined the aesthetic tools of the insurgent spectacle (diegetic rupture and self-reflexivity among them) before the actors even walked on the stage. The project perpetuated the uncritical acceptance of art as spectacle that Adorno criticizes in the "Schema of Mass Culture."³⁶⁶ *Mother Courage*

³⁶⁴ For the purposes of this chapter, *Mother Courage and her Children* will refer to the 2006 Kushner/Wolfe work, and *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* will be reserved for Brecht's 1939 play.

³⁶⁵ Brantley, "Mother, Courage, Grief and Song."

³⁶⁶ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 64-5.

was thus always already compromised, co-opted by the schema of mass culture, in particular the trappings of the neoliberal spectacle.

Kushner intended for *Mother Courage* to perform cultural functions similar to the gestures of two other insurgent spectacles, *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*. Like Sater, Sheik, and Gardarsson, Kushner took a canonical work by a German playwright known for his leftist revolutionary sentiments and made it into a spectacle for American audiences. Through its progressive politics, it would protest the U.S. and its allies' involvement in two messy and intractable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and an inchoate global "War on Terror." The producers even staged this star-studded insurgent spectacle for free in New York's Central Park and later in London's National Theater, which are of course the cultural hearts of the two nations that lead the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The goal, then, was to use the idiom of Broadway spectacularity to articulate the possibility for political agency. However, *Mother Courage* did not achieve the same political or critical resonance as *Spring Awakening* or *Woyzeck*, due largely to the pronounced lack of self-reflexivity on the role that the spectacle's stars, Streep and Kline, play in a drama that so aggressively criticizes capitalism and its structures. Its music also played a role in the misfire. Rather than disrupt and draw the audience's attention to politics, it unified the performance and created a decidedly un-Brechtian illusionism. The sacrifice to both political ideology and the uncritical acceptance of the trappings of the neoliberal spectacle with the involvement of Kushner, the Delacorte Theater, Streep, and Kline, exposes the limits of such spectacles and their susceptibility to the schema of mass culture. By compromising the insurgent spectacle's alienating but aesthetically innovative aspects to appeal to a wider audience, Kushner's *Mother Courage* allowed the pacifying

and homogenizing forces of mass culture to undermine the revolutionary content of Brecht's drama.³⁶⁷ Reading this production alongside *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*, however, offers a useful opportunity for understanding the limits of the insurgent spectacle. Kushner's *Mother Courage* attempted, theoretically and ideologically, to recreate those moments that made the other productions extemporaneously successful and controversial. Yet through its failure, it reveals that the space for liberatory mass culture is temporary. Ultimately, as Adorno and Horkheimer argued, mass culture subsumes attempts at resistance, but asymmetric theater can still create moments when genuine aesthetic innovation and political change are possible.

Like Sater and Sheik's post-punk *Spring Awakening* and Gardarsson's circus-like *Woyzeck*, the Kushner/Wolfe production also adapted a canonical German drama to a contemporary sensibility, and like them, it also used humor, bawdiness, and music to convey its political message. And even in the moments when the production seemed most as if it belongs on Broadway, with all the attendant glitz and advertising, when it relied most heavily on its celebrity stars, the subversive elements of Brecht's theater and Kushner's political vision still occasionally broke through. Streep's biography in the playbill eloquently demonstrates the tension between Streep the actor and Streep the celebrity. It read simply "Film: over 30 films. TV: three films. Awards: many, most deserved."³⁶⁸ Kushner and Wolfe's production provided the potential for Streep the actor to alternately shed and appropriate the image of Streep the movie star, and use that fame

³⁶⁷ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture."

³⁶⁸ Als, "Wagon Train."

to expose audiences to the spectacle's politics, even as that spectacle attacked the system responsible for her fame.³⁶⁹

The spectacle's greatest latent political power rested in its stars, beyond the playwright Kushner, who is a star in his own right, and the play itself. Streep and Kline's presence (both physical and artistic) made *Mother Courage* truly spectacular, beyond the play's technical apparatus. While the script and all of Kushner's considerable artistic powers were bent on creating cutting political theater, the power of the neoliberal spectacle, of the cult of celebrity, was on full display when the stars—especially Streep—took the stage. The lack of critique in the spectacle of the power of the Hollywood film star as embodied by Streep and Kline, the incompatibility of that power with the political goals of Brechtian Theater, and the journalistic reaction to both, expose the moments when the politics of the insurgent spectacle and the neoliberal spectacle break into open conflict. The mechanics of the spectacle that still resist the passive acceptance of star power and assist in political critique are, first, humor and coarse language, two alienation effects found in the other insurgent spectacles, *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*. In *Mother Courage* they work to “[knit] the audience together” and create a “visceral” effect, which the producers found necessary to keep an audience engaged in this “unforgiving German drama.”³⁷⁰ The other major contributor to the insurgent spectacle and to the popularity of Brecht's plays historically is music. In Kushner and Wolfe's *Mother Courage*, the music created a “soundscape” that evoked diverse musical traditions, notably martial music, to at once pay service to the “expanded vision of the world” 21st century American audiences now have and to demonstrate the “seductive

³⁶⁹ McCarter, “The Courage of their Convictions,” and Als, “Wagon Train.”

³⁷⁰ Kushner, *Communications*, and McCarter, “The Courage of their Convictions.”

power” of spectacle and rhetoric.³⁷¹ Ultimately, the distraction of celebrity and spectacle, even politically motivated spectacle, retards, even replaces, direct political action. *Mother Courage* becomes, rather than the impetus for political change, its deterrent. Here, more so than in *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*, the liberatory *potential* of the spectacle, and not active political engagement, is in greatest evidence. If the insurgent spectacle can be described as a kind of cultural improvised explosive device (IED), then *Mother Courage* was sometimes unexploded ordinance.

Ideology and the Insurgent Spectacle

Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder is a play full of subversive potential. Brecht’s play tells the story of Anna Fierling (known as Mother Courage) and her children as they struggle to make a living off of and in spite of the protracted brutality of the Thirty Years’ War. The play is set over the course of twelve years, and shows the consequences of Mother Courage’s attempts to survive off the war, as one by one, her children are killed by one side or the other, often as the result of her financial striving. Kushner described the insurgent spectacle’s conflicted attitude towards war as the eponymous Mother Courage embodies it: She opposes with her character all of the trials war throws at her. She is grasping and self-centered because she has nothing and suffers much. Her intelligence and cleverness have given her a small comfort—her wagon and its wares—but in exchange for that she is beaten, mortified, and robbed of everything she holds dear.³⁷² Kushner concludes his analysis: “The shattering of [her] illusion of power leads her to self-loathing and from that to a bitter contempt for the powerless, and then on to a

³⁷¹ Brantley, “Mother, Courage, Grief and Song.”

³⁷² Kushner, introduction, vii.

creeping slow stupidity, leaving us with a terrible sense of loss. The smartass, skeptical, secular intelligence governing *Courage* is at war with the fatal darkness that suffuses the action.”³⁷³

This character sketch positions Mother Courage as the epicenter for the terrible effects of war in the drama, and it also sets the tone for the political critique she attempts to make as part of the insurgent spectacle. The complex relationships between war and peace, people and the market, religion and reason inform the argumentative aspects of the notoriously-difficult-to-stage *Mother Courage*. They also highlight the thornier social problems of early-twenty-first-century America. As the key figure in this insurgent spectacle, Courage embodies our contemporary relationship to commodities, to the marketplace, “that perverts human relationships and is ultimately inimical to life.”³⁷⁴ Furthermore, Brecht’s formal inventions, specifically his use of jarring juxtapositions and epic theatrical temporal leaps, and “the probing of the social basis of character, of personality—invite us to adopt a stance of critical observation, his choices of time and place and circumstance force us out of judgment and into empathy.”³⁷⁵

Kushner’s analysis of Courage’s role in the spectacle forms the basis of *Mother Courage*’s attempted critique of 21st century neoliberal imperialism. The production sought to use Courage—via Streep—to interrogate America’s and Americans’ unsustainable reliance on an exploitative economic system, an economy of war.³⁷⁶ The Kushner/Wolfe production of *Mother Courage* continued a rich tradition of American Brecht interpretations. Brecht’s significant influence on American theatrical culture is often taken for granted. Marc Bilstein’s 1954

³⁷³ Kushner, introduction, vii.

³⁷⁴ Kushner, introduction, viii.

³⁷⁵ Kushner, introduction, viii.

³⁷⁶ Coyne, *Political Economy of War*.

production of *The Threepenny Opera* ran for seven years on Broadway, and Brecht's other major works became popular specifically among the avant-garde and in universities and more generally among the political left, especially during the Vietnam era.³⁷⁷ As the critic Robert Brustein noted, Brecht "helped turn our Pepsodent smile into a Weimar sneer."³⁷⁸ What Kushner was looking for with this production, however, was to bring more people into the audience than just self-selected Broadway aficionados and bourgeois leftists. He picked the Delacorte Theater, that is, New York City's free theater, for the production, because he hoped "for a more heterogeneous audience than one might get on Broadway for \$120 a seat."³⁷⁹ Kushner notes, "I saw lots and lots of young people at the performances, people who didn't know *Courage* and didn't know Brecht, and who, in these terrible, terrible times, were getting a chance to know his skeptical, secular, ironic, compassionate voice, hoarse with rage and injustice—just the voice for these times."³⁸⁰ Kushner justifies the free staging socially and economically, but in the next breath he admits that the "audience for *Courage* is the audience for most theater—urban, progressive, alarmed, bewildered. *Courage* should only deepen their bewilderment."³⁸¹

While Kushner made the proletarian gesture of staging the play for free, New York audiences clearly still consisted of those people already predisposed to its political agenda. However, the concessions to Shakespeare-in-the-park drama, so art-as-commercial-spectacle, coupled with a lack of critical engagement with Streep, Kline and Kushner's star power brought a level of celebrity and the attendant furor to the production that is lacking in avant-garde or university theater. Finally, Kushner comes to the heart of the spectacle's politics and the

³⁷⁷ Kalb, "Still Fearsome."

³⁷⁸ Kalb, "Still Fearsome."

³⁷⁹ Kushner, *Communications*.

³⁸⁰ Kushner, *Communications*.

³⁸¹ Kushner, *Communications*.

difficulty of treating audiences as a monolith. He claims that the goal of his spectacle was to remind people that “[we] make and are made by history. Neither presumption nor despair is right. It’s a play of very old and very immediate agony. And judgment is finally suspended, it has to be, like all great plays *Courage* demands that its audience think, and think hard, about what it’s seeing and hearing, but no one watching *Mother Courage* can watch it cold or remain unmoved. I don’t know what the intended ideal audience for this play would be. Certainly not cold people.”³⁸²

Here Kushner reveals the most dynamic and most troubling aspect of staging an insurgent spectacle: what happens next? As producers of theater, Kushner and Wolfe had one chance for the aesthetic and political bomb of *Mother Courage* to go off. The components of that bomb—humor, crude language, music and star power—are intended to react and effect both internal and external political change. The trigger for this aesthetic device is the actors’ extemporaneous delivery of the production’s aesthetic and political messages. When the celebrity apparatus interferes, when Meryl Streep-as-Mother-Courage, not Mother Courage, takes the stage, when Kushner or the reified idea of Brecht, rather than Brecht’s work, enters the political arena, the effects of the production’s formal innovations are disrupted. It becomes just another commodity for a star-crossed culture.

Where *Mother Courage* was potentially convincing was where it knitted the often-atomized American audience together through laughter and bawdiness; manipulated them—and revealed that manipulation—with music; and dealt the occasional blow to the mechanisms of the neoliberal spectacle by co-opting Hollywood star power. This insurgent spectacle achieved this success by giving the actors who purportedly wielded that celebrity power their own political

³⁸² Kushner, *Communications*.

agency. As they participate in the insurgent spectacle, they wrest their cultural power from the schema of mass culture. This creates space for the audience to develop their own political agency and resist reactionary forms of mass culture. But first and foremost, the insurgent spectacle was undermined—and its susceptibility to the neoliberal spectacle and the schema of mass culture revealed—precisely in those elements that were intended to make it most effective, namely Kushner’s politics and Streep’s celebrity.

Unlike *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*, *Mother Courage* was conceived as a critique of the politics of the George W. Bush administration and an attack on contemporary neoliberal spectacles, particularly blockbuster Hollywood action films (like the *X-Men* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* sequels) and over-produced Broadway musical spectacles (like *Tarzan*).³⁸³ Even though this ideological approach defied the historical trend of de-fanging Brecht for Broadway, the trappings of spectacle (and the critical focus on the actors, on emotion and music) still, in part, relegate it, in the annals of theater history, to another clumsy attempt to rectify Brecht with bourgeois capitalism.³⁸⁴ Despite its critical, even subversive ideology, the primacy of ideology and political ideals over tactics already compromised the production’s political efficacy, before it even came to the stage. Per Adorno, “[ideals] are accepted [by the schema of mass culture] as an ahistorical given along with others and the honor which they owe to their opposition to life becomes a means of vindicating them as legitimate and successful elements of real life.”³⁸⁵ In other words, by idealizing Brecht’s politics and the symbolic opposition theater can offer against prevailing cultural attitudes, *Mother Courage* was always already a part of the schema of mass culture, rather than set in practical opposition to it.

³⁸³ Kushner, introduction, v-viii.

³⁸⁴ Westgate, introduction, xi, and Apgar, “Misconception and Misunderstanding,” 23.

³⁸⁵ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 65

Unlike Sater/Sheik's *Spring Awakening* and Gardarsson's *Woyzeck*, which do not attempt to serve and direct protest theater or reify the politics and reputation of the originals' authors, the most problematic aspects of this idealized politicization appear in Kushner's text. He billed it as a translation but is in effect a co-option of Brecht's historical stature, and that of his fetishized text, into an adaptation. Kushner, early on in the play, speaks from the mouth of the Cook, who ostensibly criticizes a 17th Century Swedish king but is in effect directly criticizing 21st century American foreign and domestic policy: "But it's expensive, liberty, especially when you start exporting it to other countries, so the King has to levy a tax on salt back home in Sweden, so his own subjects are free but they can't afford salt, or well, the poor can't afford it, the rich can afford anything, even when it's taxed and pricey, and even better, the rich get tax exemptions."³⁸⁶ This overtly ironic moment assumes the necessity of didactics and implicitly devalues the audience's intelligence, even as it relies on that rhetorical flourish to make its political point. The reliance on irony in this episode of entertainment history, specifically reacting to the Bush administration policies is well documented, largely because, then as now, "the public discourse available to us is overwhelmingly designed as spectacle, though it rarely acknowledges itself as such. [...] In a highly stage-managed, mediatized discursive landscape, [...] earnestness can seem suspect."³⁸⁷ The general lack of public or official criticism of the Bush administration, largely the result of the mainstream press's reticence to appear adversarial in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, meant that the "uninterrogated discourse of the Bush administration was then rife for deconstruction by ironists of all stripes, who moved in to fill the critical void."³⁸⁸ While Kushner is in good company with other satirists (John Stewart and

³⁸⁶ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 17.

³⁸⁷ Day, introduction, 3.

³⁸⁸ Day, introduction, 4.

Steven Colbert, for example), the disingenuousness of Kushner-as-Brecht undermines his efforts. In his zeal to critique, Kushner compromises the tactics that made both Brecht and Kushner's celebrity culture-critic contemporaries, Stewart and Colbert, successful.³⁸⁹ Both in the way Streep and Kline perform and in the production's reviews, the focus is primarily on their influence as actor/celebrities and the mere fact that the play critiques the Iraq war—not the much more important innovative means by which it does so.³⁹⁰

Later on in the political debate between the *Cook* and *Courage*, Kushner's critique becomes less heavy-handed and therefore more effective. The *Cook* points out to *Courage*, "sometimes you have to torture the people—which by the way adds to the cost of the war, since contrary to expectations the Poles have preferred to remain unliberated, the King's tried everything, the rack and the screw and the prisons are expensive, and when the King discovered they didn't want to be free, even after torture, he stopped having any fun [...]"³⁹¹ Almost as an aside, the *Cook* underscores the great cost—in treasure and blood—of waging war on foreign soil: the invaded don't want to be "liberated," and, after the initial media scrum and attendant euphoria, the invaders stop having any fun. The question then remains how conflicts like the Thirty Years' War—or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for that matter—can continue. *Courage* rejoins to explain and defend perpetual war: "The King will never be defeated, and why, his people believe in him, and why? Precisely because everyone knows he's in the war to make a profit. If he wasn't, the little people like me would smell disaster in the war and steer away from it. If it's business, it makes sense."³⁹² While *Courage* argues that war is business, and thus profitable and useful, Kushner uses her neoliberal sensibilities (down to the religious justification

³⁸⁹ Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 186.

³⁹⁰ Rooney, "Review: 'Mother Courage and her Children'"

³⁹¹ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 34.

³⁹² Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 34.

for the war, in addition to it being fought for country and for profit) to begin a wider critique.³⁹³ Kushner writes in the introduction, “[By] the end of *Mother Courage*, arguably the bleakest conclusion Brecht wrote, his adage that war is business carried on by other means feels inadequate and hollow. The play reveals war not as business but as apocalypse, as the human nemesis, the human antithesis. War devours life.”³⁹⁴ Kushner pushes the political stakes of his production to extremes. No longer a critique of capitalism, Kushner’s *Mother Courage* became an epistemological critique of America’s role in the world.

Despite his apocalyptic conclusion and the attendant ideological stakes of his production, Kushner doesn’t believe that Brecht’s play, or his adaptation, is a rote piece of anti-war protest theater.³⁹⁵ *Mother Courage* is in fact filled with conflicts, between armies as well as ideologies. These conflicts in turn give rise not to a simple moral or an easily digestible message, but to moments that contain the possibility of confrontation between audiences and their attitudes about their political lives and the means of their financial and material survival. Despite these conflicts, this production of *Mother Courage*, even with its trappings of insurgent spectacle, suffers a similar fate to those popular Broadway productions of Brecht that have come before it. Unlike the other insurgent spectacles, critics overwhelmingly miss the play’s relevance to their own political and social conditions, and instead try to generalize Brecht’s politics and minimize the importance of the text in proportion to the actors.³⁹⁶ Even though it was staged for free, capitalism’s effects on the spectacle, its integration into the schema of mass culture, are conspicuously evident on the back cover of the translation. There the publishers proclaim that *Mother Courage* is “one of the most astonishing creations of the twentieth century,” but

³⁹³ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 34.

³⁹⁴ Kushner, introduction, vi.

³⁹⁵ Kushner, introduction, v, vi, viii.

³⁹⁶ Apgar, “Misconception and Misunderstanding,” 28.

Kushner's translation makes "Brecht's epic drama and its powerful indictment of war accessible to twenty-first century audiences."³⁹⁷ In the first page of the introduction, Kushner takes great pains to say that *Mother Courage* is complex and troublesome, but to *sell* the play, the publishers focus on the simple and the easily digestible, recalling Adorno's laconic observation that a "great poet is almost as good as a great inventor or talent scout, just as long as the standing of the work protects us from having to read any of it."³⁹⁸

The critics' focus (unintentional or not) on the formal aspects and conventions of the neoliberal spectacle aside, the topical political and ideological conflicts, as outlined above, are still present in the text. The juxtaposition of those key conflicts with critical responses to the production reveals the moments where the neoliberal and insurgent spectacles openly conflict. The cultural insurgency begins to falter in *Mother Courage*, but it is precisely those moments where the tactics of this spectacle's predecessors are ineffective that they become clear, and the hegemony of the schema of mass culture can be seen to reassert itself.

Celebrity as Political Tool: Diffusing Cultural IEDs

John Walter's documentary, *Theater of War*, which details the development of Kushner and Wolfe's production of *Mother Courage*, highlights (though, perhaps inadvertently) the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of staging effective political theater in America. During an interview, novelist Jay Cantor quips, "Why is Coke America in a can? It knows that whatever else you do, you have to add entertainment. That's the bubbles."³⁹⁹ As indicated above, the uncritical nod to theater as entertainment, and not theater as political tool, weakens *Mother*

³⁹⁷ Kushner, *Mother Courage*.

³⁹⁸ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 65.

³⁹⁹ *Theater of War*.

Courage's identity as an insurgent spectacle. The Public Theater was already susceptible to the diffusion of political power before a single line of the script was read in rehearsal. The artistic director, Oskar Eustis, felt he had to respond to the political upheaval he was witnessing in America, and he knew that he wanted to do that, before he even began the project, by having Tony Kushner translate *Mother Courage* and have Streep play the title role.⁴⁰⁰

The problem with theater as response to political crisis is that the reaction, both in terms of medium and effect, is never equal to the stimulus. Even if *Mother Courage* were an anti-war play, as its dust jacket attests, it would still face serious obstacles. Kushner notes, "if you want to protest the Iraq war, go block the entrance to something. Direct political action is the way to protest a war. You know, theater has a power, but it's very indirect power. At least what we're doing speaks to the moment in some way. It's in dialogue with the terribleness of this moment."⁴⁰¹ If *Mother Courage* is a response to anything, it is a response to particular conditions of existence, not a particular political event. Kushner finds that, rather than people changing, people should change circumstances to solve their problems, and the condition Kushner is responding to is the feeling, regarding his contemporary political and cultural climate, that "I can't get out of bed and it's fucking horrible and I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. And nobody knows what to do."⁴⁰² This gap between the stimulus (war) and the response to it (the production of theater) is the space filled by the schema of mass culture. Kushner reveals the limits of the insurgent spectacle, where entertainment replaces social engagement and the spectacle, no longer insurgent, "treats conflict but in fact proceeds without conflict."⁴⁰³

⁴⁰⁰ *Theater of War*.

⁴⁰¹ *Theater of War*.

⁴⁰² *Theater of War*.

⁴⁰³ Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 71.

The celebrities themselves, Streep and Kushner, actively opposed this political lethargy. In *Voicing Dissent*, Violaine Roussel and Bluewenn Lechaux outline the perceived power that celebrities have in political arenas. The “figure of the ‘engaged celebrity’ defines his/her civic role as the result of a direct relation with a public: the symbolic coup at work is based on the equivalence stated between ‘having audiences’ and ‘having constituencies,’ justifying the self-assignment of an ability/legitimacy to speak for others, especially for voiceless people, here against the war.”⁴⁰⁴ Streep echoes this analysis almost to the letter. She says of her role in the spectacle: “I’m the voice of dead people. So... I’m the interpreter of lost songs, and I’m the person who, you know, filtered through the sensibility of right now, 2006, with everything we know, I’m the interpreter, I’m between the audience that’s going to hear it and my sense of what language they understand and the person who wrote it years ago and conceived it—Brecht.”⁴⁰⁵ Assuming this lofty role of mediator between the dead, Brecht, and the audience, Streep is at once looking to exploit her celebrity to fulfill what she perceives as a political need, and at the same time cast off that celebrity to fulfill an artistic function.

Streep is in this moment conscious of her celebrity as a product, indeed, an integral part, of the Hollywood “star system.” The star system developed in Hollywood in the nineteen-twenties to promote and sell films by making commodities out of particular actors. It introduced a degree of consistency to films and also spawned an industry of celebrity culture that extended off screen. The star system helped save the large studios during the wide spread American cultural upheaval of the sixties and seventies, and continues to impact the way films (and now theater headlined by movie stars), are produced and marketed. Indeed, “spectacle is seen as of particular value, alongside stardom,” to promoting and selling these cultural products as widely

⁴⁰⁴ Roussel, *Voicing Dissent*, 22.

⁴⁰⁵ *Theater of War*.

as possible. What was new and potentially disruptive about *Mother Courage* was the presence of stars on stage and behind the pen, pushing their own political agenda. The spectacle's lack of self-reflexivity on its use of stardom, though, ultimately contributed to the play's equivocal critical reception.

The problem that immediately arises, as *Theater of War* demonstrates, is that Streep cannot simply remove her mantle of celebrity when she chooses, nor can she choose how her celebrity effects or is perceived by her audience.⁴⁰⁶ The fetishizing of celebrity happens not only in relation to the stars of the production and the audience, but also in relation to Brecht and the production team. In the documentary, artistic director Oskar Eustis stands outside of his apartment building holding a 1975 Meissen china plate bearing a smiling image of Brecht, a gift from his East German emigrant mother.⁴⁰⁷ He holds it up to the camera and says with a smile, "This is real Dresden china. Can't get something like this at the five and dime."⁴⁰⁸ Ironically, Brecht's own celebrity, and its fetishization and in this case literal objectification, compromised this production from the outset.

This compromise reveals itself in the production's reviews. Hilton Als wrote for the *New Yorker*: "It's difficult to see Meryl Streep the actress without being dazzled by Meryl Streep the legend."⁴⁰⁹ It is a testament to Streep's devotion to the role and her political goals that she left audiences with more than an impression of her star power. Als ends his critique of her as *Courage* by noting, "Her grandeur is merely a façade, she seems to be telling us, and she is as committed to the job at hand as any other conscientious working actress."⁴¹⁰ The appeal to a

⁴⁰⁶ Bell, *American Idolatry*, 73.

⁴⁰⁷ Colman, "Possessed"

⁴⁰⁸ *Theater of War*.

⁴⁰⁹ Als, "Wagon Train."

⁴¹⁰ Als, "Wagon Train."

workman-like performance, of sacrificing her glamour on the altar of art, is attractive and useful, especially in support of an argument for *Mother Courage* being a fine example of the insurgent spectacle. However, Als' observations are undermined by other voices from the audience.

Jeremy McCarter put it succinctly when he noted: "Of course, it's not the prospect of seeing unforgiving German drama that has people camping out for tickets. However equivocal the result, Streep in *Mother Courage* represents a genuine episode in New York stage history."⁴¹¹

The equivocal result, timely political theater undermined by stardom, is the legacy of *Mother Courage*.

Mother Courage occupies a liminal zone in mass culture, neither insurgent spectacle, nor an entirely co-opted product of the schema of mass culture as feared by Adorno and Horkheimer. The production thereby reveals the trenches in which this ideological war is fought. Where do the battle lines appear? In reading critic Ben Brantley's review of the production, the effects of the schema of mass culture both on this production and the aesthetic sensibilities of members of the audience become vivid. He argues that the elements of the spectacle do not form a "fully integrated and affecting portrait" except, ironically, "when Ms. Streep sings the Brechtian songs that have been newly (and effectively) scored by Jeanine Tesori."⁴¹² In fact, Brantley is so impressed by Streep, when he should be the most alienated by her Brechtian performance, that he sees a future in advertising for her, much like that of sports figures. He takes this praise for her spectacular performance further, writing, "By the way, with every song she sings, Ms. Streep suggests that, in addition to endorsing vitamins, she could become a queen of the Broadway musical, should she ever choose."⁴¹³ The nexus of celebrity, commodity, and entertainment that

⁴¹¹ McCarter, "The Courage of their Convictions."

⁴¹² Brantley, "Mother, Courage, Grief and Song."

⁴¹³ Brantley, "Mother, Courage, Grief and Song."

Brantley creates here shows precisely how the insurgent spectacles function and how the schema of mass culture co-opts those tools to fulfill its own ends. One of celebrity's primary functions is to sell, and not just products, but ideology.⁴¹⁴ The invocation of Brecht without any apparent understanding of how "Brechtian" songs should function (certainly not as a "seamless, astonishing whole,") the comparison of Streep to a sports figure and the attendant lucrative advertising opportunities, and the insistence on a monolithic, consistent spectacle all betray the deleterious effects that fetishized celebrity and the schema of mass culture can have on political theater. Whereas *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck* relied on unknown actors to engage in their cultural insurgency, *Mother Courage* was compromised by the expectation of a "fully integrated," "astonishing" production that makes full use of Streep's celebrity capital. That celebrity capital, in fact, is all that many critics could focus on. Reviews from the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *New York Daily News*, and the *New York Observer* focused solely on Streep on stage, and made no mention of the production or its politics.⁴¹⁵

Mother Courage is neither simple spectacle nor subversive political theater. This alloy of conflicting politics and ideology can only be partially contributed to the context surrounding the production (the actors involved, the media coverage.) The conflict is also endemic to the text, and is the problem constantly posed by Brecht's work: the inability to reduce it to serve a specific political function. The Chaplain elucidates the problem both of effective political theater and seemingly intractable global conflict in a moment of drunken clarity, reflecting on the death of the Field Marshal. He counters the arguments of some of his contemporaries that the war will one day end by shedding some light on the nature of war: "Wars get stuck in ruts, no one saw it

⁴¹⁴ Bell, *American Idolatry*, 73.

⁴¹⁵ Of additional interest (or as additional evidence of the hegemony of the schema of mass culture,) these reviews are in a collection on a Meryl Streep fan site, accessed August 5, 2014, <http://www.simplystreep.com/content/career/stage/2006mothercourage.html>.

coming, no one can think of everything, maybe there's been short-sighted planning and all at once your war's a big mess. But the Emperor or the King or the Pope reliably provides what's necessary to get it going again. This war's got no significant worries as far as I can see, a long life lies ahead of it."⁴¹⁶ Ultimately, Kushner's *Mother Courage* represents and performs a struggle for survival and a challenge to change the social circumstances in which that struggle occurs. The schema of mass culture has adapted itself to the insurgent spectacle, requiring potential elements of opposition to fight merely to exist, rather than to resist.

Humor and Profanity: The Rhetoric of the Insurgency

Despite the pall that the various stars' celebrity cast over the politics of the production, there are still some redemptive moments in the spectacle. Carl Weber, at one time Brecht's assistant director, once remarked of the playwright, "His sign of approval was laughing at things. Even very sad things."⁴¹⁷ The spectacle attempts to raise that same laughter in the audience. As in *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*, *Mother Courage* also follows Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin in employing laughter as a disruptive force and a precondition for true seriousness. And again, as in the other insurgent spectacles, *Mother Courage*'s bawdiness expresses a carnival spirit, grotesque and disobedient to ruling codes of conduct. Humor, crude language, and progressive political critique are the rhetoric of the insurgent spectacle. They destroy social and dramatic barriers and undermine preconceived notions about the relative status of canonical drama, movie stars, and theatergoers. This dramatic rhetoric relieves the prudery of neoliberal propriety and the onus of presenting stereotypically stuffy canonical German drama from the

⁴¹⁶ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 63.

⁴¹⁷ *Theater of War*.

actors, even as it draws the audience into the collaborative effort of making fun within the theater space.

Kushner notes that, “the humor of the play was something I had to make a decision about. I think that the jokes are amusing but not ha-ha funny in the original. I’ve made them more ha-ha funny.”⁴¹⁸ This adaptation accomplishes specific rhetorical and political goals, and also takes into consideration both the historical context of Brecht’s *Mutter Courage*, as well as Kushner’s own. Kushner originally envisioned recreating the mood in the Schiffbauerdamm Theater in Berlin in 1949—“that terrifying setting for the first performances of *Mother Courage* after the war, with people climbing over rubble to get to the theater. And I came to realize that you can’t. We’re so not that audience. We’re culpable of many terrible crimes right now, but we’re so free of the consequences. We’re also less of a community in a certain sense. We’re more atomized. And one thing I think that laughing out loud does is it knits an audience together.”⁴¹⁹

This laughter is political, and Kushner is aware of its liberatory power. The carnival spirit of laughter is a central component to the production’s political effectiveness. It unites the audience through a shared act and against—however temporarily—the object of laughter. These moments allow the audience to “aggressively assert its claim on the space, against what’s going on onstage. Laughter is noisy and big and you can see the actors react to it [... Laughter] is perhaps the most important means by which a crowd of unconnected, isolated and atomized, maybe even somewhat antisocial or at least anticomunitarian Americans knit themselves into a collective entity, an audience, that little community formed at each performance of every play.”⁴²⁰ Kushner develops this aesthetic program from the very first scene:

⁴¹⁸ Kushner, *Communications*.

⁴¹⁹ Kushner, *Communications*.

⁴²⁰ Kushner, *Communications*.

The Army Recruiter: Imagine if you will some jerk, concave chest, veiny legs, a total zero. I buy him beers until he's shitfaced, and then: [...] Jump up and fled like a louse flees louse-powder. [...] A place like this, you lose your conviction in the Inner Goodness of Man, Sergeant.

The Sergeant: The problem with these people is they haven't had enough of war. [...] Everything rots in peacetime. People turn into carefree rutting animals and nobody fucking cares.⁴²¹

This opening exchange establishes the spectacle's political critique as well as the tone of its delivery. The two soldiers complain colorfully about the state of their recruits, six years into the Thirty Years' War, even as they bemoan how everything degrades further without the threat of conquest and death. The problem for them isn't that the country is war-torn and the pool of recruits from which they can draw is already depleted, but rather that those unfortunate people still in the conflict zone are not as willing to continue participating as the Recruiter and Sergeant would prefer. They (and by proxy, their superiors) see the continuation of war as the solution to social troubles, not their cause. The manner of their delivery, laced with obscenity, draws a laugh from the audience, as does the dissonance between the soldiers' actions (bribing and coercing potential recruits with alcohol) and their ideology (continuing a holy and just war and thereby establishing a firm morality in the populace.)

Another aspect of the spectacle's humor is sexual. Courage's and her daughter's Katrin's bodies are under threat and negotiated just like the wares in her cart. It is a point of pride that Courage and Katrin, whatever other deprecations they may suffer, do not have to sell themselves like the prostitute Yvette. Kushner also highlights the transactional nature of sex and Courage's unwillingness to engage in it early in the play:

The Sergeant: I want your license to sell. You want my boot up your ass?

⁴²¹ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 7.

Mother Courage: Excuse me but you may not discuss my ass in front of my children, that's disgusting. And my ass is not for you.⁴²²

Later, and in one of the episodes where Kushner very firmly inserts his "ha-ha funny" kind of humor into the production, as opposed to Brecht's more subtle variety, Courage rebukes the Chaplain's playful advances on her daughter:

The Chaplain: And who's this comely young lady?

Mother Courage: She isn't comely, she's stay-at-homey, and I don't want clergy sniffing up my daughter.⁴²³

The pun and the jab at the clergy give Courage the energy needed to maintain her (and Streep's) central role in the spectacle.⁴²⁴ The kind of laughter that results from these jokes is complicated, however, and theorist Tim Beasley-Murray provides some insight into how that laughter functions and the political roles it can fulfill.

Drawing on the writings of both Bakhtin and Benjamin, Beasley-Murray develops a theory of laughter that is useful when critiquing products of mass culture. The kind of laughter in this insurgent spectacle is both scornful and melancholy, and as a result fulfills a carnivalesque function, although not necessarily a liberatory one.⁴²⁵ It is scornful because the audience laughs at the institutional and spiritual corruption on display, and it is melancholy because the audience recognizes the same hierarchical dysfunction in their own circumstances. The laughter can give way to serious reflection.⁴²⁶ Scornful laughter, however, like that produced by the entertainment industry is, according to Adorno, "full of the worst Sadism."⁴²⁷ This type of laughter is inimical

⁴²² Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 10.

⁴²³ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 32.

⁴²⁴ Kalb, "Still Fearsome."

⁴²⁵ Tim Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2007), 157-58.

⁴²⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 157-58.

⁴²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Letters to Benjamin," trans. Harry Zohn, in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 123.

to the insurgent spectacle and serves the schema of mass culture. The melancholy nature of many of the jokes also complicates their role in the insurgent spectacle, because that melancholy has the potential to depoliticize, to lead to solipsistic self-reflection, rather than action.⁴²⁸ However, Beasley-Murray finds in the melancholy of Walter Benjamin “an opposition between ironic scorn and sobriety. The serious and prosaic mode of reflection is the mode in which the truth content of the work of art is revealed as the ‘eternal sober continuance of the work.’⁴²⁹ Nevertheless, withering, ironic, scornful satire that reveals the absurdity in the bad work of art [...] is a necessary clearing of the ground that establishes what is criticizable and hence what is art.”⁴³⁰ Coupled together, laughter as conceived by both Bakhtin and Benjamin demonstrate the struggle of humor in the insurgent spectacle to deliver its political payload.

Kushner also blends the slapstick comedy that Adorno considers sadistic with simple situational comedy and irony. He plays with audience expectation and laughter results from surprise, rather than scorn or irony. Upon overhearing that her son Eilif, whom Mother Courage thought dead, has killed several farmers and taken their meat, she slaps his face and reprimands him: “You brazen sticky-fingered fork-tongued son of a Finn!”⁴³¹ The reprimand, first, surprises audiences with its word choice (Finn, rather than the expected “bitch”) and second, is, ironically, not for the murders and the theft, but for putting himself in harm’s way and not surrendering to them. This cocktail of humor on the one hand makes it difficult to ascribe to the jokes particular political and ideological methods, and on the other, like comedic shrapnel, assures that at least some of them find their mark and contribute to the collective laughter that Kushner sees as the goal of his political theater.

⁴²⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 9.

⁴²⁹ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism,” 1:178.

⁴³⁰ Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 10.

⁴³¹ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 26.

The other major device that Kushner uses to further politicize the spectacle is profane and obscene language. Used in part to give a brutal edge to the production, obscenity also serves as a marker for Kushner's thoughts on contemporary politics. At the beginning of the third scene, Mother Courage disguises her daughter with soot in front of a Catholic advance, and then stands back to admire her handiwork: "That ought to do it. Let me look. Not bad. Like you've been rolling in shit."⁴³² Here, Courage shows war's absurdity and, secondarily, how sex is a commodity. Kattrin is forced to disguise herself to avoid rape and exploitation at the hands of religious warriors. Rather than finding bourgeois safety in beauty and financial security in return for exclusive sexual rights (marriage), Courage covers her daughter in filth to protect her.

Kushner sustains his political critique through humor after Courage sends her daughter away and her son, Swiss Cheese, and the Chaplain sit down to discuss what they are to do about the Catholic military advance. Mother Courage complains, "One's got his cash box and the other's got an ecclesiastical sense of humor and I'm stuck between the two and I don't know which is worse."⁴³³ Here Courage emphasizes the tension between the two major forces at work both in *Mother Courage* and in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: capital and religion. Mother Courage, the pragmatist, is caught between the two, exploits and is exploited by them. The audience can laugh at Courage's droll complaint, but the similarities of the economic and religious realities of wars 400 years apart cannot be entirely lost on them. The Chaplain puts a fine point on this critique with his "ecclesiastical sense of humor" when he tells a joke about Martin Luther: "Martin Luther met a priest who was begging for alms by the side of the road. Luther said to the beggar priest, 'After I turn the world inside out we won't need priests!' 'Maybe

⁴³² Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 37.

⁴³³ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 38.

not,' said the priest, 'but you'll still need beggars,' and he went on his way."⁴³⁴ Here, again, Kushner's incisive humor deftly undermines the conflicts and institutions bourgeois society holds so dear. As the scene closes and Courage begins to realize that there is no good option for escape from her predicament, her humor becomes laconic, grotesque: "We're prisoners, but so are head lice."⁴³⁵ Her comment reminds audiences both of the play's opening conversation between the Army Recruiter and the Sergeant, and creates a concise, graphic image of what Courage and her children do: feed of the lives (and deaths) of those around them.

After Swiss Cheese is killed and Mother Courage sings "The Song of Great Capitulation," at the opening of the fourth scene, humor once again gives way to obscenity for overt political statements. Mother Courage and a Young Soldier wait outside of a captain's tent to register a complaint, and the soldier shouts: "I'm not letting myself get fucked like this. You come outside right now and let me cut your fucking head off!"⁴³⁶ This violent outburst sets the stage for a confrontation between the wronged soldier and his guilty commander, but as the scene plays out, the obscenity and passion lessen, the soldier's conviction fades, and the expected conflict never comes. Both the soldier and Courage slink away, beaten and embittered before either gets the justice they deserve, but realize they cannot expect or even fight for.

Music and Critique: "Our Beautiful Song" About the End of the World

"The Song of Great Capitulation" is one of the defining musical moments of Kushner's spectacle. Kushner and Wolfe felt that the music originally written for *Mutter Courage* "was written for a very specific vision of the world, [...] and our vision of the world has expanded."⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 39.

⁴³⁵ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 39.

⁴³⁶ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 53.

⁴³⁷ Kalb, "Still Fearsome."

They recruited composer Jeanine Tesori to create the “soundscape” for the play, which, Wolfe contends, creates a “visceral connection” between the audience and the spectacle.⁴³⁸ Historically, music was also critical to Brecht’s theater. Again, director Carl Weber notes: “I still maintain that if he would have [been] born, let’s say, [in] ’49, he might have become a rock star. [...] It’s quite feasible to me that he would have become a kind of Bob Dylan.”⁴³⁹ The indispensability of music both to Brecht and the insurgent spectacle invite closer scrutiny of “The Song of Great Capitulation,” “The Song of Solomon,” and “*Eia Popeia*” in particular, both for the potential they contain to criticize contemporary spectacles of mass culture, and the ways they fail to do so.

Mother Courage sings “The Song of Great Capitulation” at the beginning of the fourth scene, after she fails to bargain for the life of her son, Swiss Cheese. He is killed and she is forced to deny that she knew him, fearing the loss of her wagon and her livelihood. It is an expression of her despair and a potentially effective Brechtian critique of her circumstances. The script and Kushner’s conception of the song indicate a self-reflexivity that never made it to the stage. For Kushner, it is “an old person saying to a young person, ‘just wait. Everything that’s beautiful and fiery and incandescent about you right now is gonna get, you know, drowned in shit because the world has nothing to offer you but lessons in how to eat shit and pretend to like it.’”⁴⁴⁰ Kushner’s use of obscene language here is apropos, as it continues the aesthetic goals of his translation, which uses humor (in the song’s case, plenty of sarcasm) and obscenity to underscore the importance of the action. Kushner also maintains that, among the litany of crimes and failures for which Courage is responsible, “[The song is] the most unforgivable thing that Courage does in the entire play. She lets her despair and her sorrow and her anger at herself sap

⁴³⁸ Kalb, “Still Fearsome.”

⁴³⁹ *Theater of War*.

⁴⁴⁰ *Theater of War*.

this young guy of what exists in him, of revolutionary anger, of rebellion.”⁴⁴¹ The song is a kind of microcosm for the play’s entire action: the two (bad) choices these characters have are to give in and survive, or fight and die. Courage begins to sing a cappella, and shifts quickly between song and speech, as she provides commentary on her own narrative:

Back when I was young, fresh as grass and innocent,
Any day, I’d fly away on butterfly wings.

(Speaking.) Not just a peddler’s daughter, me with my good looks and my talent
and my longing for a better life!⁴⁴²

Spare piano accompaniment then joins Courage’s voice, sometimes slightly ahead, sometimes behind, to create an awkward dissonance as Courage gives in to her despair.

I’d accepted that I’d only got the shit that I deserved. On my ass, or on my knees,
I took it with a grin.

(Speaking.) You have to learn to make deals with people, one hand washes the
other one, your head’s not hard enough to knock over a wall.

Singing.

Birdsong from above:
Push comes to shove.
Soon you fall down from your grandstand
And join the players in the band
Who tootle out that melody:
Wait, wait and see.
And then: it’s all downhill.
Your fall was God’s will.
Better let it be.

Many folk I’ve known planned to scale the highest peak.
Off they go, the starry sky high overhead.

⁴⁴¹ *Theater of War.*

⁴⁴² Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 55.

(*Speaking.*) To the victor go the spoils, where there's a will there's a way, at least act like you own the store.⁴⁴³

Unlike the slick punk rock anthems of *Spring Awakening* or the ballads from *Woyzeck*, the songs in *Mother Courage* don't create diegetic ruptures in the action of the play. Rather, and especially for Streep and Kline, they provide the actors opportunities to make political statements even as their unremarked upon status as celebrities undermines their efforts.⁴⁴⁴ First, they reveal the mechanics of their craft with the quick cuts between singing and speaking and the attendant changes in tone and attitude. This narrating-and-commenting work is just that—work—which reminds audiences that what they are viewing is political art, not mere spectacle.⁴⁴⁵ Second, they represent moments of interiority (that the audience witnesses) that then receive immediate—and sometimes contradictory—criticism from the singer. This kind of self-dialogue allows viewers the opportunity to reflect on both the song and the singer, and draw their own conclusions. As a tool of the insurgent spectacle, this is especially important for Streep and Kline because—when it works—it leads the audience to interrogate the characters and the work the actors, outside of their roles as celebrities, do on stage. This aspect of the musical elements becomes important later in the chapter, where I examine how these tactics fail, and how they ultimately serve the schema of mass culture.

If Streep's most important musical moment is "The Song of Great Capitulation," then Kline's is "Song of Solomon," which finds all of Mother Courage's children dead but for her daughter Katrin, and Kline's Cook and Courage in league to survive a particularly harsh winter. The trio approach an inn and the Cook attempts to convince Courage to leave her daughter and

⁴⁴³ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 56-7.

⁴⁴⁴ I cite the songs here only for exemplary passages, but both "The Song of Great Capitulation" and "Song of Solomon" should be read in their entirety for the full rhetorical effect of their structure to become apparent.

⁴⁴⁵ Brantley, "Mother, Courage, Grief and Song."

come take over the establishment, as he, very literally, sings for his supper in an attempt to get the people inside to open their doors and save his life, on threat of violence. While most Broadway spectacle relies on the development of a character for its dramatic action (finding love, correcting a fatal flaw, etc.), *Mother Courage* argues that it is virtue, not vice, that is fatal. In “Song of Solomon,” the Cook critiques, one by one, the virtues of wisdom, bravery, honesty, and pity and shows how they are useless in the world:

No doubt you’ve heard of Solomon,
The wisest man on earth!
He saw with perfect clarity,
He would spit on the cursed hour of his birth
And say that all was vanity.
How deep and wise was Solomon!
And see, before the night descends,
He longed to taste oblivion!
He started wise but as a fool he ends.
Oh, wisdom’s fine; we’re glad we’ve none.

(*Shouting.*) All virtues are dangerous in a world like this, as our beautiful song shows, you’re better off having an easy life and breakfast, in our opinion, hot soup.⁴⁴⁶

In fact, the song’s entire point is to convince the inn’s proprietors to give Mother Courage and him some food, not in an appeal to virtue, but under threat of theft and violence.⁴⁴⁷ The Cook recognizes the appeal of virtue, but in the next breath shows how it does not apply to his circumstances. In *Mother Courage*, the characters have fatal virtues (Eilif’s bravery, Swiss Cheese’s loyalty, Katrin’s compassion, even Courage’s unbreakable will,) rather than fatal flaws. It is not the characters that need to change, but the circumstances in which they are suffering.

⁴⁴⁶ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 89.

⁴⁴⁷ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 91.

Kline's delivery of the song, complete with "jazz hands" more at home with the Rockettes than on a 17th century battlefield and awkward looks out into the audience, underline at once the silliness of the scene—he is, after all, singing for his supper—and serve as a foil for the despair and desperation of the interstitial spoken lines. Audience members laugh and nod their heads with the melody, but in the interim, there is tense stillness and recognition, at least among some critics, that this part of *Mother Courage's* world is an uncanny proxy of their own.⁴⁴⁸ This montage of unsettling techniques that accompany the Cook's words are meant to promote, if not political action, at least political awareness.

It was this political awareness that convinced Streep to take on the role of *Mother Courage* in the first place. The emotional and intellectual platform that music gives to the actor, beyond speech, was a determining factor for her. She says: "You want to know why I wanted to do this play? It was not because of the scene where Katrin is brave [...]. I wanted to make it—it's because of the lullaby, [which] we see over and over and over and over on television, Lebanon, Srebrenica, women, just going 'Why?!' over the body of their children. 'Why?!' That's what it was. That's the whole thing. For me. [...] What's the end result? Bones in the landscape."⁴⁴⁹ Here, Streep uses her celebrity to become a political actor. In her personal speech as well as in her performance, Streep the person, Streep the actor, uses her celebrity capital toward political ends.

Streep and Kushner's roles as political celebrities foil that of another famous political actor, Paul David Hewson, better known as the rock star Bono, the frontman of U2. But whereas Streep and Kushner use art as a political statement, Bono has historically relied on his celebrity

⁴⁴⁸ McCarter, "The Courage of their Convictions."

⁴⁴⁹ *Theater of War*.

(or rather, politicians have relied on his celebrity) to influence public opinion.⁴⁵⁰ Bono's foray into Broadway Theater was also a catastrophe, with his "pet musical-theater project" 2011's *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* standing as "one of Broadway's greatest ever messes."⁴⁵¹ Unlike Bono's endorsement of and complicity in "the world's war-mongers pretended to lavish some relief on a few poor countries while saddling them with more neoliberal conditions,"⁴⁵² acts like *Mother Courage* "directly raise the question of the contemporary meaning of democracy and its paradoxical nature, where politics has become a profession, [...] and where the political has consequently been extracted from the usual functioning of other social spheres."⁴⁵³ Kushner and Streep both try to reincorporate the political into the spectacle. The lullaby, which Courage sings over Katrin's body after she is killed raising an alarm to protect some villagers, allows Courage to express her despair, but also allows the audience to critique her position as grieving mother, implicating Courage and those around her in the death of her daughter.

Maybe she's sleeping

Sings:

Eia popeia,
Who sleeps in the hay?
The neighbor's brat's crying
While my children play.
The neighbor's kid's shabby
But my kids look nice,
With shirts like the angels wear
In paradise.

Neighbors can't feed 'em
But mine shall have cake,
The sweetest and choicest

⁴⁵⁰ Browne, *Frontman*, 154-5.

⁴⁵¹ Browne, *Frontman*, 155.

⁴⁵² Browne, *Frontman*, 155.

⁴⁵³ Violaine Roussel and Bluewenn Lechaux, *Voicing Dissent: American Artists and the War on Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 23.

The baker can bake.

Eia popeia,
I see your eyes close.
One kid lies in Poland.
The other—well, who knows?

(*Speaking.*) You should never have told her about your brother-in-law's children.⁴⁵⁴

The songs and humor throughout the spectacle aim to elicit both an emotional and a critical response from the audience. Kushner and Streep clearly believe in their work's potential, if not to motivate direct political action, to at least raise awareness and in their own ways to engage with the public in political discourse. Despite that belief, and despite the *potential* of the insurgent spectacle to be political, the tools of Brechtian Theater and this insurgent spectacle become subsumed to the schema of mass culture.

Defeated and Entertained: “That’s the Bubbles”

What *Mother Courage* finally reveals about the insurgent spectacle is how quickly the schema of mass culture reacts to threats to its hegemony. The need for entertainment, which the culture industry instills and feeds, eventually undoes any formal innovations that arise to confront it. As critic Stefan Sullivan puts it, “The lag-time between an original and a simulation, between a new counterculture fad and its cooption by the corporate mainstream is getting shorter and shorter. No matter that when these fads are co-opted they lose much of their original meaning, their social context, and their intrinsic value [...] always just enough original meaning can be salvaged to give standard fare an added cachet.”⁴⁵⁵ The Kushner/Wolfe production

⁴⁵⁴ Brecht, *Mother Courage*, 102-3.

⁴⁵⁵ Stefan Sullivan, *Marx for a Post-communist Era: On Poverty, Corruption, and Banality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 150.

succumbed to what Andy Warhol and the Coca-Cola Company both recognized: whatever else you do, you have to add entertainment. The uncritical spectacle of music and celebrity encourages the passive “reverential awe” produced in the schema of mass culture.⁴⁵⁶ By ceding Brecht’s bitter and angry politics to the easy draw of celebrity, Kushner and Wolfe undermined much of the progressive political power they may have been able to muster.

This “reverential awe” is present everywhere in the spectacle, from the producers’ reified appreciation for Brecht to the Shakespeare-in-the-park mood of the Delacorte playing for free in Central Park. These extrinsic influences only amplify the problems that the schema of mass culture creates in the performance and reaction to the production itself. Already conditioned to the passive bourgeois spectacle historically made available by Streep and theater in the park, audiences are quick to accept the content of the play as political spectacle (and simple anti-war theater, according to the play’s dust jacket) rather than as troubling cultural critique.

The impact of celebrity on the theater is not just limited to neutralizing progressive political drama. In an interview with *Here and Now*’s Jeremy Hobson, *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley eloquently summarizes the role of both criticism and celebrity on Broadway: “I could probably break a small show [with a bad review], but if it’s something with Daniel Craig in it, I could say ‘Well, if you see this, you’ll go blind,’ and it wouldn’t make much of a difference.”⁴⁵⁷ The primacy of celebrity over the institutions already in place to monitor and “read” mass culture (like journalists and theater critics) demonstrates in part the power of the spectacle. The “previously unimaginable degree of visibility and power” that stardom promises those who seek and fetishize it brings the spectacle of the movie star off of the silver screen and

⁴⁵⁶ Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” 63.

⁴⁵⁷ Brantley, interview.

onto the stage.⁴⁵⁸ It changes the way theatergoers engage the action on stage and, in the case of *Mother Courage*, ultimately coopts the production's subversive politics and Epic-Theatrical elements.

Where *Spring Awakening* paradigmatically exemplified the insurgent spectacle and *Woyzeck* in large part adopted that paradigm within a carnivalesque context, *Mother Courage* relied too heavily on middle class preconceptions of popular theater, celebrity, and the industry that produces it to publicize its politics. This reliance on coopted forms of mass culture was inimical to the actors' and producers' political goals. *Theater of War* revealed those participants' inability to extract themselves from it, and in fact it demonstrated how deeply the fetishized Brecht was ingrained in the production's development and how reliant Kushner and Streep were on their own celebrity and reputation to make political statements. This uncritical use of celebrity ultimately serves the political actors who were initially responsible for the crises the actors reacted against, rather than the people affected by the social and political problems the spectacle attempted to engage.

The subtlety of the effects of Streep's celebrity is particularly compelling. Unlike the majority of woman in Hollywood, who are sold and marketed as sex symbols, Streep is marketed for her skill as an actor.⁴⁵⁹ Audiences line up to see her, in whatever medium, not to be titillated, but to be "cultured," to witness her craft. Like classical music performances for Adorno, Streep represents the commodity of high culture.⁴⁶⁰ She is the sign of serious art, of liberal social and aesthetic sensibilities. Audiences then consume that image, embracing her role as purveyor of bourgeois commodity culture. Couple that with the lack of "shocking" extradiegetic interruptions

⁴⁵⁸ Orgeron, *Hollywood Ambitions*, 2.

⁴⁵⁹ Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *21st-Century Hollywood: Movies in the Era of Transformation*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 159.

⁴⁶⁰ Adorno, "The Schema of Mass culture," 68.

found in the other two spectacles and a pronounced lack of Epic Theatrical techniques, and it becomes clear why this spectacle, not loud and perfectly, comfortably middle-class, failed to achieve its political goals. Brecht didn't stand a chance.

Conclusion

The End of the Insurgency: “Our Forces were Slight. Our Goal Lay in the Far Distance.”

Like beleaguered, rebellious forces in conflicts all over the world, the outlook for the insurgent spectacle is bleak. However, the insurgent spectacle created an intellectual space where political agency was possible—even encouraged, and that liberatory thought remains the precondition for change. Even this limited, internal revolt is radical within the context of 21st century American culture, and stems directly from the political and cultural milieu of the source texts. As philosopher Alain Badiou notes, contemporary American culture “does not engage in thought as revolt” for two reasons: the first is that it styles itself as already free, as “the free world,” in opposition, apparently, to the rest of the world, which is unfree; the second is that, at the same time, this world “standardizes and commercializes the stakes of such freedom.”⁴⁶¹ This “monetary uniformity” of the trappings of freedom has a pacifying effect, but “does not guarantee [...] the free use of the is freedom, since such use is in reality already coded, oriented and channeled by the infinite glitter of merchandise.”⁴⁶² This is why, he argues, American mass culture “exerts an intense pressure against the very idea that thinking can be insubordination or revolt.”⁴⁶³

The insurgent spectacle undermined both the notion of guaranteed or even extant freedom within the world of Badiou’s “inverted commas,” (“our world,” the “Western” world, etc.) and the commercialized packaging of that freedom as presented to and consumed by its audiences. Within the space of the theater, for the duration of the spectacle, audiences were allowed, stirred, to revolt. The insurgent spectacles created worlds inhabited by characters who were not free, and

⁴⁶¹ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 30.

⁴⁶² Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 30.

⁴⁶³ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 30.

the means of their subjugation were laid bare. And simultaneously, the stakes of these characters' subjugation—or the price of their freedom—were shown to be insurmountably high. Not only were the “stakes of freedom” not standardized or commercialized in the insurgent spectacles, they were revealed in each to be unattainable, and therefore irrelevant. As a result, these dramas were to some degree able to shield the eyes of their audiences from the “infinite glitter of merchandise” and allowed them intellectual and aesthetic spaces in which they could be insubordinate, could revolt, even if only in thought.

While the preceding chapters have made clear that the insurgent spectacles achieved temporary advances against the hegemony of the culture industry, it is also clear that the insurgent spectacle as a theatrical event has become coopted to the schema of mass culture, and that new revolutionary forms have and will continue to develop in opposition to conservative, commercialized mass culture. There is ample evidence of the insurgent spectacle's appropriation, from Lea Michelle's ascension from the *Spring Awakening* workshops off Broadway to *Glee* stardom and the billboards on 42nd, selling Revlon; to the decline over the course of his theatrical career in the critical popularity of Gardarsson's formal innovations, from revolutionary to kitschy; and finally the failure of Kushner's *Mother Courage* to incite more than a brief flicker of interest in political theater in the popular imagination. It is also clear that the insurgent spectacle stands as an example of artists wresting individual political agency from the schema of mass culture, if only briefly.

Recall the cultural background against which these spectacles played out: global financial and environmental crises, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the open-ended “War on Terror,” and a host of both international and domestic sites of social conflict, including rape, suicide, sexual abuse, and abortion. These crises, coupled with a reticence in news media and other forms

of mass cultural entertainment to adequately address them, generated enough intellectual and political dissatisfaction to foment this new type of spectacle. The theory of the insurgent spectacle is based in large part on German critiques of mass culture developed leading up to and then in the aftermath of the second World War, as well as a deployment of the carnivalesque, as conceived of by Bakhtin. Adorno's critiques in particular were informed by his interactions both with Hollywood and mass culture in New York City, and lay the foundation on which the rest of the insurgent spectacle's theoretical argument is based. This sort of spectacle is "self-justifying," and grounds itself in the human body in "defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art."⁴⁶⁴ This physicality takes on many and different forms in these spectacles, but in each case, it allows the spectacle to slip the "schematic reason which compels everything to prove its significance and effect."⁴⁶⁵

In the insurgent spectacles, the self-reflective attention to and use of the body, whether that be singing, dancing, or performing aerial acrobatics, worked alongside careful stagecraft and layers of textual meaning, to both alienate and engage audiences. These spectacles also participated in a rich tradition of theatrical subversion, which includes the German source texts from which these adaptations took so much of their source material and political bite. This history and adaptation to a specific political context allowed the insurgent spectacle to function somewhere between capitalist instrumentalities of mass culture and less malevolent consumer-driven commodities often examined under the umbrella of Cultural Studies.⁴⁶⁶ The preceding readings of these productions demonstrate that mass culture is not a monolith, neither wholly subservient to capitalist forces, nor is it totally benign.

⁴⁶⁴ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 81.

⁴⁶⁵ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 81.

⁴⁶⁶ Newman and Danesi, *X-Rated*, among others.

The means by which the insurgent spectacles engaged in their various cultural conflicts recall their political and intellectual predecessors in the forms they adapted to confront the schema of mass culture: the traditions of carnival, the circus, and in the cult of the Hollywood star. The works' progressive tendencies demonstrate how this episode of American theater attempted to accomplish its political goals and make use of the revolutionary or liberatory content of the classic German dramas upon which they relied. In other words, part of their popularity and political power was the result of their history, of their identity as works of revolutionary German drama, with all that entails about the possibilities of freedom, enlightenment, reason, and resistance to Fascism and petit bourgeois social stagnation. These spectacles took their power from the audiences' relationship, not to an ahistorical spectacle, but to a historicized and re-politicized work of art.

Like Brecht's Epic Theater, it seems that that fate of the insurgent spectacle is not to be a revolutionary spark or the banner of a new political order. Instead it stands as a symptom of a large trend in the history of theater, a chapter of small political will set against a well-established regime of spectacle, and the necessity of maintaining asymmetry to that regime as it coopted and appropriated the tactics of the theater of resistance. This, too, has historical precedence. Brecht was by no means harmless to prevailing political powers: he and his family were under surveillance for his politics. His daughter Barbara recalls that time with humor: "I mean, we were lucky. The Japanese were put in camps. Which is not one of the prettiest... chapters."⁴⁶⁷ While Kushner and Streep, part of the legacy of Brechtian theater, were presumably not under surveillance for their work or in danger of being put in a concentration camp, just the same, their work was ground under the cultural machinery it was designed to confront.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁷ *Theater of War*.

⁴⁶⁸ Stephan, "Communazis."

Streep recognized that machinery and the imperative to confront it, and, unlike many of the other contributors to the insurgent spectacles, she vocalized her culpability in reifying the system from which she benefits. She freely admitted, during the production of *Mother Courage*, “We all live off the war,” but her artistic response to that admission was drowned out by the noise of her celebrity.⁴⁶⁹ This result is evidence of what Debord identifies as two antagonistic forces at work in mass culture and the society of the spectacle. The first is the aspect of the production that attempts to critique and historicize, as exemplified in the text and Kushner and Streep’s political testimony, which is part of the “project of culture’s self-transcendence.”⁴⁷⁰ The second is the aspect of the spectacle which compartmentalizes its politics and leads to its “management as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle. The first tendency casts its lot with the critique of society, the second with the defense of class power.”⁴⁷¹ The Shakespeare-in-the-park feel of the production, the free access to celebrity and commodified “art” and “culture,” as represented in the tourist brochures and in the news media, clearly demonstrate that the latter aspect of the spectacle had the greatest and longest lasting effect on *Mother Courage*.⁴⁷²

Looking back on the insurgent spectacle as an episode of American theater history, rather than a robust feature of contemporary productions, makes clear the aspects of that mode of spectacularity as well as the schema of mass culture’s adaptation to it. After *Spring Awakening* and *Woyzeck*, it was evident both to theater producers and the producers of mainstream media that Broadway had become a legitimate source of political theater and therefore of potential income.⁴⁷³ Where *Mother Courage* strays from the practice and ideology of the insurgent

⁴⁶⁹ *Theater of War*.

⁴⁷⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 131.

⁴⁷¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 132.

⁴⁷² Brantley “Mother, Courage, Grief and Song” and McCarter “The Courage of their Convictions.”

⁴⁷³ Rooney, “Inhabiting a Six-Legged Nightmare”

spectacle is in its reliance on celebrity and the reification of the idea of Brecht and Brechtian Theater from the outset. The first two spectacles discussed in the preceding were politically engaging because they were unexpected, innovative. *Mother Courage*, by contrast, appears complacent in its reliance on established aesthetic formula to accomplish its political ends.

This episode in the history of American theatrical adaptation of German drama does not simply demonstrate the power of the culture industry. Rather, the insurgent spectacle demonstrates the culture industry's susceptibility to sabotage, to the gray market of aesthetic and political experiences. The preceding examples of the insurgent spectacle are not the only representatives of popular, subversive political theater. *Urinetown*, *Speak Truth to Power*, and a pair of plays—*No Man's Land* and *Waiting for Godot*—both starring Sirs Patrick Stewart and Ian MacKellan, are just some examples of subversive theater with high profiles. It remains to be seen if they will garner the same critical and popular attention, or participate in a high-stakes political conversation, as the insurgent spectacles examined here.

It is clear that, whatever the political consequences of these productions (or lack thereof), they are fundamentally different, both in terms of form and political content, from spectacles such as *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* or any of the myriad of Walt Disney screen-to-stage adaptations. As noted above, *Spider-Man* relies, both for substance and marketing, on musical contributions from The Edge and Bono of *U2* fame. The latter of the pair is, according to Harry Browne (who, by his own admission, is being polemical here), “an ambassador for imperial exploitation, a man who has turned his attention to a world of savage injustice, inequality and exploitation—and made it worse.”⁴⁷⁴ Bono's contribution to the unrestrained spectacle of *Spider-Man* can certainly be seen as propagating the same. These neoliberal spectacles rely

⁴⁷⁴ Browne, *Frontman*.

heavily, sometimes solely, on already-established and vast marketing machines to produce revenue (which, hilariously and inspiringly in the case of *Spider-Man*, they occasionally fail to do.) They are paradigmatic examples of culture industry products. They are, for Broadway, the standard.

The lasting progressive effects of the insurgent spectacles, especially *Mother Courage*, in American theater history may be negligible, but the historical and critical value of the artistic and political impetus behind the production is obvious. With a nod to the poetic, it seems that Kushner's *Mother Courage* shares a similar fate to that which Brecht foresaw for himself and his contemporaries. He writes in "To Those Born Later:"

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
Clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Given to me on earth [...]

But you, when the time comes at last
When man is helper to man
Think of us
With forbearance.⁴⁷⁵

It may be that the insurgent spectacle will be simply an isolated rupture in the schema of mass culture. Its time has certainly passed. The goal of this project was to document that rupture and provide evidence that the hegemony of the schema of mass culture is not absolute, and that, following in the footsteps of the insurgent spectacles, other forms of theater have taken up the challenge of resisting the hegemony of mass culture and the stagnating, homogenizing effects of the neoliberal spectacle.

⁴⁷⁵ Brecht, "To Those Born Later," 318-320.

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