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Brecht and Political Theater

Laura Bradley

Political theater takes many different forms. It encompasses plays and productions that campaign on behalf of a particular party or issue, as well as those that explore political concerns without advocating solutions. It may take place in professional theaters, put amateur performers on stage, or take performances out onto the streets. Some of Brecht's plays are immediately recognizable as political theater, however narrowly defined: *The Decision* and *The Mother* explore communist theories and strategies of class struggle, while *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* satirizes Hitler's journey to power in order to alert audiences to the need to combat fascism. The plays that Brecht wrote from the late 1920s onward also fit a broader definition of political theater, as they promote a new attitude and consciousness in the audience, encouraging spectators to recognize their own agency and practice socially interventionist behavior. Brecht identified this progressive attitude with Henry Ford, Einstein, and Lenin; his focus on figures from industry, science, and politics indicates his desire to develop a theater that engages with modernity, and it corresponds to his ambition to develop a theater for the "scientific age."¹

Unlike his contemporary Erwin Piscator, who documented his practice under the title *The Political Theatre*, Brecht did not rely on this term when describing and publicizing his work.² This was partly because Brecht came to see all theater as representing political and social interests, and as presenting a view of the world and individual agency within it. During the Weimar Republic, he had no sympathy for the management of the Volksbühne movement, which expressly subscribed to a concept of art that was above party-political divisions and sought to unite theater audiences through a communal experience.³ In Brecht's view, theater that presents itself as

¹ "[Das moderne Theater]," BFA 21, 383.

² Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980).

³ Georg Springer, "Zur 'Krise der Volksbühne,'" *Die Weltbühne* 23, no. 12 (March 22, 1927): 462–464 (462).

being above politics actually lends its support to the status quo, creating a false unity of classes, generations, and minds.⁴ So instead of labeling his work political theater, Brecht used the terms epic theater and non-Aristotelian or dialectical theater – which placed the focus on aesthetics. This was consistent with his view that theater needed to stage its revolution on aesthetic grounds by developing methods for engaging with contemporary reality.

This emphasis on aesthetics was partly a reaction against the subordination of art to politics advocated by some of Brecht's contemporaries in the early Weimar Republic. In 1920, for example, the program for Piscator's Proletarian Theater declared that every artistic intention would be subordinated to the goal of revolution – a statement that belies the major contribution that Piscator went on to make toward the development of an aesthetics of political theater.⁵ Brecht's explicit emphasis on aesthetics can also be seen as a reaction against the use of traditional dramatic forms in plays such as Friedrich Wolf's *Cyanide* or Carl Credé's *§218*, which campaigned against the prohibition on abortion. Brecht conceded that such plays could have tangible political effects if the situation was ripe, noting that working-class women who had seen one of these plays campaigned successfully for health insurance providers to pay for contraceptives.⁶ Another example was Peter Martin Lampel's play *Revolt in the Reform School* (1928), which provoked political debate about the penal education system. Brecht criticized Lampel for not developing innovative methods that could be transferred to other plays.⁷

Neither Brecht nor Piscator viewed naturalism or expressionism as acceptable aesthetic models for their work. German naturalist playwrights tended not to accept the label of political theater; their priority was to document reality, rather than to intervene in it. Yet their focus on social problems – such as poverty, alcoholism, and disease – meant that their work was often politically contentious and was seen as having the potential to advance socialism. Gerhart Hauptmann may have argued that his play *The Weavers*, depicting strikes and famine in the Silesian weaving community, was social rather than socialist, but Lenin arranged for a translation by his sister to be circulated in Russia, and police officials sought to ban performances in Berlin.⁸ Piscator acknowledged that it was in naturalist

⁴ "Die Sucht nach Neuem," BFA 21, 183. ⁵ Piscator, *Political Theatre*, 36.

⁶ "Unmittelbare Wirkung aristotelischer Dramatik," BFA 22, 394.

⁷ "[Neue Dramatik]," BFA 21, 275.

⁸ Peter Skrine, *Hauptmann, Wedekind, and Schnitzler* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), 40; Gary Stark, *Banned in Berlin: Literary Censorship in Imperial Germany, 1871–1918* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2009), 135–142.

drama that the proletariat first appeared as a class, and that this form of drama had briefly transformed the German stage into a political platform.⁹ Brecht's main criticism was that naturalism disabled and disempowered spectators by making poverty and suffering seem natural, rather than exploring their man-made causes. He went so far as to describe this approach as naïve and criminal.¹⁰ Brecht also argued that the format of Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Hauptmann's *Rose Bernd* was too small, and that it was not worth observing the fate and behavior of characters with out-of-date prejudices.¹¹ This argument resonates with Piscator's view that theater needed to move beyond scenes from private life, "beyond the purely individual aspect of the characters and the fortuitous nature of their fates."¹²

Prominent expressionist plays directly tackled political themes such as war and revolution, and the writers Ernst Toller and Erich Mühsam were involved in the failed Bavarian Revolution of 1918–1919. Toller distributed scenes from his play *The Transformation* at strike meetings; he rejected the notion of a class-based, party-led revolution in favor of a spontaneous and inclusive popular uprising, to be achieved through spiritual renewal. Brecht had no patience with this anti-material approach. In *Drums in the Night*, he attacked the expressionist romanticization of martyrdom, identifying revolutionary zeal with the pathos of opera and sentimental novels, and opposing it with the physical reality of death and decay. Brecht's protagonist Kragler breaks with the dramaturgical model of the expressionist *Heimkehrerdrama* (plays about returning soldiers), refusing to allow his flesh to rot in the gutter for the sake of other people's ideas. Kragler's closing tirade attacks those who consume political theater as entertainment from their comfortable seats in the auditorium – a tirade that may call to mind the audiences watching *The Transformation* in Berlin in 1919, while its author was beginning a five-year prison sentence for his role in the Bavarian Revolution.

The charges that Brecht and Piscator leveled against naturalism and expressionism are a guide to their own theatrical ambitions. They both rooted their theater in a material approach to reality, showing the social and economic influences on, and implications of, characters' decisions and actions. They both related the action to broader political, social, and economic contexts. And they both saw history not as a separate realm,

⁹ Piscator, *Political Theatre*, 32–33.

¹⁰ "Über die Verwertung theatralischer Grundelemente," BFA 21, 232.

¹¹ "Die Not des Theaters," BFA 21, 229–232 (229). ¹² Piscator, *Political Theatre*, 93.

nor as a means of escapism, but as something to be explored for its relevance to, and difference from, the present. Yet while Brecht came to theater as a playwright, going on to explore new methods of acting as a director, Piscator worked consistently as a director, adapting existing texts and using stage technology – such as simultaneous stages, projected images and maps, and film sequences – to contextualize and comment on the action. Brecht also adapted plays by other writers and used projections, but a difference of emphasis and approach remains.

We can consider briefly how epic theater creates the scope for the agency that Brecht found lacking in naturalist drama. Epic theater shows that characters have choices, allowing us to imagine how different decisions or circumstances might yield different results. We see *Mother Courage* agonize over how to save both her son Swiss Cheese and her business, decide too late to save her son whatever the cost, and lose him as a result. Brecht distances the audience from the characters and action at key moments: The deaths in *The Mother* and *Mother Courage* are announced in advance through scene captions. This encourages the audience to focus on how the deaths occur, whether they could have been prevented, and how the surviving characters on stage respond. The plays' episodic form allows the audience the space to scrutinize characters' actions and decisions. Sometimes, there is formal discussion between episodes: In *The Decision*, a Control Chorus questions the revolutionaries in between episodes in which they show how their former comrade committed tactical errors in his work for the Communist Party. These plays focus on characters who are individualized, and in some cases individualistic, but their attitudes and actions have a wider political and social significance. In the opening scene of his 1951 production of *The Mother*, Brecht used images of three working-class women to locate the heroine's struggle to feed her son in a global class context.¹³ This approach shows how Brecht's stage practice drew on techniques that Piscator had pioneered in the Weimar Republic.

Some of the work that Brecht produced around 1930 drew on agitprop theater. Comprising agitation and propaganda, agitprop developed in the Soviet Union. It involved amateur performers who performed sketches and songs that advocated communism and addressed the political issues of the day. The agitprop movement in Germany took off in the late 1920s, stimulated by a tour of Russian troupe *The Blue Blouses*. The composer Hanns Eisler collaborated with the Berlin troupe *The Red Megaphone*, which appeared in *Kuhle Wampe*, the film that Brecht made with Eisler and

¹³ Bertolt Brecht, *Die Mutter*, dir. Brecht, film dir. Manfred Wekwerth, DEFA, 1958.

Slatan Dudow in 1932. Its influence is also apparent in the direct agitation of some of the songs in *The Decision* and *The Mother*, the re-enacted episodes in *The Decision*, and the non-naturalistic aesthetic of the premiere productions of both plays. The action in *The Decision* was staged on a platform, using very basic props and costumes. For *The Mother*, the rooms and locations on stage were delineated by white sheets stretched between poles; the set could easily be transported between performance venues, and there was no attempt at historical verisimilitude. Brecht addressed topical questions of political strategy in both plays, such as the desire to relieve poverty immediately versus the drive to eradicate its causes. While his approach to this particular question drew criticism from the Communist Party, lyrics from his agitational songs were published in the communist press, and a scene from *The Mother* was performed at an election rally for Ernst Thälmann.¹⁴

It was during this period that Brecht developed a Marxist critique of the theater apparatus, focusing on the means of production. He came to regard theaters and the press as two large industries that were in collusion, arguing that critics were assessing plays to see if they could prop up the existing theater.¹⁵ Through his learning plays (*Lehrstücke*), Brecht began to experiment on the margins of, and outside, commercial theater: In collaboration with Kurt Weill, he wrote *He Said Yes* as a school opera; with Weill and Paul Hindemith, he wrote *Lindbergh's Flight*, which was presented as a radio play; and with Eisler, he wrote *The Decision* for performance by workers' choirs. Performances of his plays sometimes took place in professional venues hired on a short-term basis: *The Decision* was staged at the Berlin Philharmonic at 11:30 pm, and performances of *The Mother* moved around Berlin, starting in the Wallner-Theater and moving to the Komödienhaus am Schiffbauerdamm and the Lustspielhaus on Friedrichstraße. Yet at the same time, the premiere production of *The Threepenny Opera*, written in collaboration with Weill, was a major commercial success, playing to packed houses in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm.

Left-wing theater increasingly came under pressure in the Weimar Republic, even as the demand for it grew during the Great Depression. Piscator left the Volksbühne theater in 1927, after a public controversy over his use of contemporary film footage – including images of Lenin – in his

¹⁴ See, for example, "Wie die Krähe," *Welt am Abend* (Berlin), January 29, 1932; Jürgen Schebera, *Hanns Eisler: Eine Bildbiografie* (East Berlin: Henschel, 1981), 63.

¹⁵ "Über eine neue Dramatik," BFA 21, 234–239 (236, 237).

production of Ehm Welk's *Storm over Gotland*. The cost of running his own political theater company, the Piscator-Bühne, as a private enterprise proved prohibitive; high ticket prices were not enough to save the first Piscator-Bühne from bankruptcy in June 1928, and the second, refinanced Piscator-Bühne closed in 1929. Left-wing theater also faced growing risks of censorship: Lampel's play *Poison Gas over Berlin* was banned after one performance, and *The Decision* was banned in Erfurt in January 1933, after the police had intervened partway through a performance.¹⁶

During his years in exile, Brecht wrote his plays without access to the same rich community of politically like-minded collaborators that he had enjoyed in Berlin, with few opportunities to mount productions. When his plays did reach audiences, they were often not those that Brecht had initially envisaged: He wrote *Mother Courage* partly as a warning to Scandinavian audiences that they could not profit from German rearmament without paying the price, yet it was at the Schauspielhaus Zürich, four years into World War II, that the play was premiered. Brecht's work on a production of *The Mother* in Copenhagen in 1935 appears to have been relatively similar to his experience of staging the play in the Weimar Republic, in that he was collaborating with a group of working-class actors with strong communist sympathies who were open to his aesthetic approach. Yet when Brecht came to work with the Theatre Union in New York, he found that this ostensibly political theater was used to the naturalistic theater that he opposed, and that it was unreceptive to the pared-down, combative aesthetic of *The Mother*. Brecht's attempts to use the local Communist Party leadership to bring the theater to heel only betrayed his misunderstanding of the situation, and of what political theater meant in this context.

After World War II, when Brecht founded the Berliner Ensemble with his wife Helene Weigel in East Berlin, he finally had the opportunity to control the means of production – without the commercial pressures that had dogged Piscator's attempts to do so in the Weimar Republic. Ideological training was integral to the Ensemble's work: During rehearsals for *The Mother*, its members attended weekly lectures on the Russian Revolution.¹⁷ The repertoire included Brecht's own plays, those of contemporary playwrights, and works from the German cultural heritage, but they were chosen for their potential relevance to the contemporary

¹⁶ John Willett, *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 110; anon., "Weltrevolution auf der Bühne," *Thüringer Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 25, 1933.

¹⁷ "Logbücher '50-'52," Berliner Ensemble Archive. This archive has now been incorporated into the Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv and is being catalogued.

situation and staged using Marxist dialectical methods. Younger members of the Ensemble, led by Isot Kilian, Egon Monk, and Bruno Lorenz, performed songs and sketches in workplaces, advertising their productions and encouraging workers to visit the theater. They sold tickets directly to factories and toured the GDR with productions aimed at labor union audiences.¹⁸ These various initiatives point to the way in which the Berliner Ensemble's entire approach was underpinned by a holistic understanding of political theater – one that went far beyond the argument or subject matter of any individual play.

The Berliner Ensemble quickly established its profile as a theater with a political focus. Internal reports note that some GDR workers saw the company as too political, and that train maintenance workers wanted to give away their tickets to Johannes R. Becher's play *Winter Battle* because the title indicated that it was about war.¹⁹ In *Theaterarbeit*, a richly illustrated documentary record of the Berliner Ensemble's first six productions, Brecht and his collaborators nevertheless included evidence showing how spectators related his work to their daily political struggle. The volume quotes a letter from a spectator describing himself as a comrade from West Berlin, stating that he had recently become tired of fighting against the malice of the class enemy and the stupidity of his class comrades, but that seeing *The Mother* had revived his spirits.²⁰ It also quotes GDR Hero of Labor Hans Garbe describing how he had been talking to his colleagues about the same production.²¹ *Theaterarbeit* thus constructs the ideal working-class response that was sometimes lacking on the ground.

Both Brecht's plays and his work at the Berliner Ensemble have had a major impact on political theater internationally. The Berliner Ensemble saw the dissemination of Brecht's methods as integral to its mission, hosting international theater practitioners and sending its own directors to stage productions abroad. Directors have taken inspiration from Brecht's methods in developing their own distinctive forms of political theater, ranging from Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in the United Kingdom to Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil. While Brecht's treatment

¹⁸ See Laura Bradley, "Building New Audiences at the Berliner Ensemble, 1949–1956," *Oxford German Studies* 47, no. 2 (June 2018), 211–229.

¹⁹ Anon., "Protokoll der Besucherrats-Sitzung am Dienstag, dem 3.12., 18 Uhr im Nebenraum der Kantine," 7, in "Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre," Berliner Ensemble Archive (see note 17); Rohde, "Arbeitsbericht d. Werbebüros für Februar 1956," BBA III5/79–87 (85).

²⁰ Quoted in Ruth Berlau et al. (eds.), *Theaterarbeit: 6 Aufführungen des Berliner Ensembles* (3rd ed.) (East Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1966), 338.

²¹ "Hans Garbe über die Aufführung," in *Theaterarbeit*, 168–170 (170).

of gender in his plays has often been criticized, feminist theater practitioners such as Caryl Churchill have adapted his dramaturgical methods for their own purposes. Brecht's legacy for political theater has been to show how theater can empower spectators to see the status quo as changeable, and to provide theater practitioners with methods designed to achieve this. It is up to us to use, critique, and adapt them.