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OLIVER DOUBLE AND MICHAEL WILSON

Brecht and cabaret

One of the most popular anecdotes about Brecht's early years in Munich involves a significant encounter with the popular comedian Karl Valentin (1882–1948).

In October 1922, following on from the success the previous month of the première of *Drums in the Night* at the Munich Kammerspiele, Brecht was appointed to the dramaturgical team of the theatre and was immediately given the task of rewriting and adapting Marlowe's *Edward II*. The writing took place over the winter of 1922/3, but the eight-week rehearsal period, then the longest in the Kammerspiele's history, did not start until January 1924. In one of his conversations with the essayist and critic Walter Benjamin on 29 June 1938, Brecht told the story of how 'the idea of Epic Theatre first came into his head' at one of these rehearsals:

The battle in the play is supposed to occupy the stage for three-quarters of an hour. Brecht couldn't stage manage the soldiers, and neither could Asya [Lacis], his production assistant. Finally he turned in despair to Karl Valentin, at that time one of his closest friends, who was attending the rehearsal, and asked him: 'Well, what is it? What's the truth about these soldiers? What *about* them?' Valentin: 'They're pale, they're scared, that's what!' The remark settled the issue, Brecht adding: 'They're tired.' Whereupon the soldiers' faces were thickly made up with chalk, and that was the day the production's style was determined.¹

A few years later, Brecht himself wrote a version of the same story in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*: 'When the Augsburgger was producing his first play, which included a thirty minutes' battle, he asked Valentin what he ought to do with the soldiers. "What are soldiers like in battle?" Valentin promptly answered: "White. Scared."' (pp. 69–70).

There are certainly some minor discrepancies between the two versions of the story, but what is strikingly similar about them is that the apparently obvious observation which Valentin made – that the soldiers are scared and therefore 'pale' or 'white' – led to the theatrically radical decision to whiten

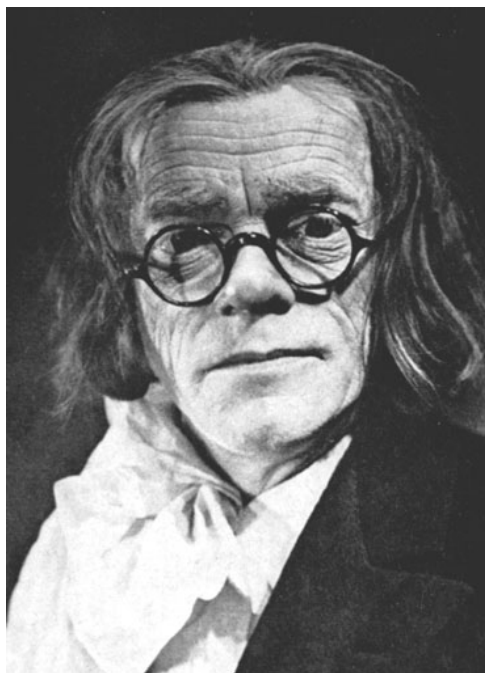
the soldiers' faces with thick, obvious make-up. There is quite a leap of the imagination from that observation to that decision, and it is not clear whether Valentin specifically suggested white make-up or whether Brecht thought of it himself in response to his comment.

Either way, though, the significance of the story is that Brecht was faced with a theatrical problem over which he had been unsuccessfully deliberating for some time and that Valentin provided the solution. Even if Brecht came up with the white make-up himself, it was his familiarity with Valentin's work that allowed him to see how Valentin himself would have solved the problem in his own performances. Indeed, photographic documentation of Valentin in performance indicates that he did indeed use make-up and prosthetics in a similar way – the actual make-up (or false nose or moustache) was often outlandish in appearance, but applied with simplicity and restraint and, perhaps more significantly, used to indicate the social attitude of the character (for example, a wild-haired wig for artistic genius or outrageous whiskers for an old-fashioned militarist).

Brecht liked this grotesque stagecraft and commented in particular about the fact that Valentin's stage partner, Liesl Karlstadt (1892–1960), would often play male characters, describing her as 'a popular woman comedian who used to pad herself out and speak in a deep bass voice'.² The idea of cross-casting appealed to Brecht because he saw it as a kind of alienation device, arguing that if a woman plays a man, we realise 'that a lot of details which we usually think of as general human characteristics are typically masculine'.³

One of the remarkable features of the incident at the *Edward II* rehearsal is the fact that Valentin was present at all. Karl Valentin was arguably the foremost German comedian of his generation and certainly the most successful cabaret performer in Munich during the opening decades of the twentieth century. He was Brecht's senior by sixteen years and, by the time he and Brecht first met,⁴ he already had behind him a decade-long highly successful career. It is, therefore, difficult to understand the attraction to Valentin of a friendship with the young student Brecht, especially given the comedian's well-documented antipathy towards both the theatre and intellectualism.

Here was an unlikely alliance, with a young playwright from the legitimate theatre taking advice from an established popular comedian from the illegitimate stages of the cabaret and the *Volksängerlokale*. This represents a paradigm shift in Brecht's thinking about theatre. As is often the case today, viewed against the aesthetic principles of classical theatre, naturalism and expressionism, Brecht's theories are difficult to comprehend fully, but against the aesthetics of cabaret, they become lucid and easily comprehensible. Brecht had been fascinated by cabaret for some time and was aware that there were aspects of the popular stage that he wanted to incorporate into



2 and 3 Karl Valentin in contrasting character make-up

his own theatrical work, but it is here, for the first time, that we see the beginnings of a coherent aesthetic, which would later be called 'epic'. The perspective of cabaret allowed the theatre to cast social reality in a new, sharper and ultimately more objective light.

Brecht at the *Wilde Bühne*

Brecht's interest in cabaret stemmed from being both a fan and a participant. It has been argued that he made only one appearance at an authentic cabaret.⁵ In 1921 and 1922, the young playwright was dividing his time between Munich and Berlin and experiencing mixed fortunes. The positives, like winning the prestigious Kleist Prize, were balanced by the failure of his direction of Arnolt Bronnen's *Vatermord (Patricide)* at the experimental Junge Bühne and being hospitalised for suspected tuberculosis due to undernourishment.

It was clearly a period of great financial uncertainty for Brecht, and on 23 December 1921 he records in his diary a visit to Trude Hesterberg (1892–1967),⁶ who in September of that year had opened the *Wilde Bühne*, one of the foremost political cabarets in Berlin. He made such a deep impression on the assembled group that Hesterberg immediately booked him for six nights for a fee of 500 Marks. Brecht's debut took place in January 1922 and began with his singing 'Apfelböck' in a 'somewhat unorthodox and monotonous manner'⁷ for which he received muted applause. He then began to sing 'The Legend of the Dead Soldier' which from the very beginning provoked restlessness among the audience. By the time he got to the end of the second verse, 'wild pandemonium broke out in the stalls' and he was 'howled down by his reactionary audience'.⁸ Apparently, nobody had expected such a reaction, which may have been due to a nationalistic crowd of visitors who were in Berlin for an agricultural show and had wandered into the *Wilde Bühne* in search of a good night out. Hesterberg brought down the curtain and Walter Mehring was left to address the audience with the following prophetic words: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, that was a great disgrace, but not for the poet, but for yourselves. And one day you will boast that you were here this evening.'⁹

Whilst this may have been Brecht's first and last appearance on the Berlin cabaret stage, the experience did nothing to dampen his appetite for cabaret upon his return to Munich.

Munich and *Die rote Zibebe*

When Brecht first arrived in Munich as a student in 1917, he was already a great enthusiast for the popular performers he had witnessed at the annual

fairs in Augsburg, notably the ballad singers with their illustrative placards and declamatory styles of delivery. Augsburg, however, was very different from Munich. Between 1882 and 1907 Munich's population had doubled in size to 500,000 (at the beginning of the nineteenth century it had been a mere 30,000) and almost half of the population were immigrants from the surrounding Bavarian countryside. Furthermore, Munich very much saw itself as a centre for culture and art, in opposition to the economic centre of Berlin. The city played host to, among others, Frank Wedekind, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Arnold Zweig, Johannes Becher, Lion Feuchtwanger, Ernst Barlach, Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schoenberg. In reality, Munich was a city of both artistic and political extremes. This was the city that was briefly governed by a revolutionary Soviet government in the months following the end of the First World War, and that was also the birthplace of Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). It was a haven for the bohemian and political literary cabarettists, but turn-of-the-century Munich also had 100 *Volksängerlokale*, venues for the more popular forms of entertainment, where nearly 400 singers and comedians would ply their trade amongst the noisy audiences of artisan working-class beer drinkers.

Whilst Brecht only ever saw himself as a serious artist (with the usual pretensions of youth), he appears to have been an avid consumer of all that the city had to offer. Certainly by 1918 Brecht was already composing and singing his own songs, as well as singing those of, in particular, Wedekind, but he appears to have limited his performances to private gatherings amongst his friends and informal playing in public houses.

When Brecht resumed his studies in the summer of 1919, after completing his military service as a hospital orderly in a VD clinic, he became more heavily involved in the cabaret scene, often spending his evenings watching Valentin perform. In October 1919, he performed with the comedian at the Oktoberfest, as well as writing five one-act plays which Völker describes as 'pure Valentin in style, grotesque pictures of everyday life with eccentric dialogue in which logic is stood on its head'.¹⁰ Of these, *Die Hochzeit* (*A Respectable Wedding*), the only one to be performed in Brecht's lifetime, is arguably the most interesting. It tells of an impecunious newly-wed couple, who invite their friends and relatives to the wedding party at their flat, which is furnished with items that the husband himself has made. The couple proudly show off their new home, but as the party progresses and the drink takes effect, the guests begin to fall out and, piece by piece, the furniture begins to fall apart. Finally the guests are sent home and the newly-weds throw themselves onto their bed, which promptly collapses beneath them.¹¹

By the time that Brecht was expelled from the university for non-attendance at the end of November 1921, he was dividing all his time between sitting in

on rehearsals at the theatre and visiting the cabaret. His most significant direct foray into the Munich cabaret scene occurred with his staging of *Die rote Zibebe* at the Kammerspiele, which opened on 30 September 1922, the day after the première of *Drums in the Night*. There are several descriptions of the event, but most seem to be based on the account by Hanns Otto Münsterer, who attended the second performance of what he described as ‘an attempt to exploit the theatrical space for a literary cabaret’.¹² To begin with, Max Schreck in the character of Glubb, the landlord of *Die rote Zibebe*, the tavern in *Drums in the Night*, introduced a series of performers who ‘stepped out of cabins like puppets’.¹³ Brecht himself appeared in the first of the two performances, singing the songs which had failed so miserably in Berlin earlier in the year. There were also appearances by established cabaret performers like Klabund and Joachim Ringelnatz, as well as many of the actors from the play, who performed some of Brecht’s poems.

The second half of the cabaret was given over to a performance of two pieces by Karl Valentin and Liesl Karlstadt. The second of these was a newly written playlet, *Das Christbaumbrettl*,¹⁴ in which Valentin played the part of a father who has been sent out by his long-suffering wife (Karlstadt) for a piece of board to act as a stand for the family Christmas tree. Valentin brings home two long planks with which he proceeds to destroy the furniture as he attempts to bring them into the house and make them the right size. By the end of the play, there is complete chaos on stage with a host of screaming children (one of whom is played by a dwarf) and the arrival of a chimney sweep (played by a giant). It is only then that Valentin realises that he has forgotten to tear the dates off the calendar and it is not Christmas at all but the middle of summer. It is of some significance that the scene is redolent of the domestic chaos depicted in Brecht’s earlier one-acter, *Die Hochzeit*.

Other connections with cabaret

Whilst Brecht seems to have had no direct involvement in cabaret after 1922, he retained close professional relationships with many cabaret performers, and it is particularly interesting that he often turned to these, rather than classically trained actors, when casting his productions. The cast of the première of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928 included both Rosa Valetti (1876–1937), a singer who had made a name for herself on the Berlin cabaret scene as the ‘most expressive and politically uncompromising singer of the literary political cabaret of the twenties’,¹⁵ and Kurt Geron (1897–1944), one of Berlin’s biggest stars in the 1920s, who made appearances in every major revue and cabaret of the time. In spite of his riotous

appearance at her Wilde Bühne, Brecht's relationship with Trude Hesterberg was good enough for him to offer her the part of Widow Begbick in the Berlin première of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in 1931.

This propensity to cast actors with cabaret experience was something that stayed with Brecht throughout his career. Therese Giehse (1898–1975), who worked with him on the Zürich première of *Mother Courage* and who in 1948 joined the permanent company of the Berliner Ensemble, was a co-founder, in 1932, of Munich's political cabaret Die Pfeffermühle. Perhaps most famously, Ernst Busch (1900–1980), who was rehearsing as Galileo for the Berliner Ensemble when Brecht died in 1956 and who had appeared in *Kuhle Wampe* and the 1928 production of *Threepenny Opera*, was perhaps better known for his membership of the communist cabaret groups *Die Wespen* and, later, *Die Brücke*. Furthermore, the relationship between Brecht and cabaret was two-way and various artistes, including Kurt Geron and Kate Kühl, sang his songs in their cabaret performances.

One of the most fascinating of Brecht's cabaret connections was the short silent film he worked on in February 1923, entitled *Mysterien eines Frisiersalons* (*Mysteries of a Hairdresser's Shop*). The project came about as the result of a delay in the start of rehearsals for *In the Jungle of Cities*. Brecht was to write the script and Erich Engel was to direct. The film featured a number of leading cabarettists, with Valentin in the star role, supported by Karlstadt and the popular cabaret singers Annemarie Hase (1900–1971) and Blandine Ebinger (1899–1993), who was married to the celebrated cabaret composer Friedrich Hollaender. Some of the actors Brecht worked with at the time, like Max Schreck, Erwin Faber and Carola Neher, also appeared in key roles.

It would seem that for Brecht the project was to be entirely experimental and, according to both Faber and Ebinger, he never produced any of the script he had promised to deliver and instead simply had the actors improvise. While Valentin was left frustrated with the film, Ebinger claimed that the entire project was just a frivolous piece of fun: 'I never heard anything about getting money out of the film . . . we didn't ask for any. Valentin just cut off Horwitz's head, handed it to me, and I danced around like a little Salomé . . . it was all done just for fun and laughs.'¹⁶ And yet in spite of the rather playful atmosphere that ran throughout the making of the film, there does seem to have been a seriousness to Brecht's experimentalism. According to Faber, Brecht was attempting to explore the possibilities for comic improvisation that he had seen so skilfully executed on stage by Valentin and on the screen by Chaplin: '[H]e wanted us to improvise to improve the whole thing, because he loved the improvisations of Valentin and Chaplin. He must have thought, "Those are similar comics, aren't they?" So he made this film.'¹⁷ Certainly the film was

no commercial success, but its use of cabaret performance styles and its place within Brecht's developing aesthetic are unmistakable.

Cabaret structure

Although Brecht's direct involvement with Karl Valentin ended when Brecht moved to Berlin after the Kammerspiele's 1923–24 season, Brecht remained in close contact with the Berlin cabaret scene and the influence of his formative years in Munich can be seen in the evolution of the guiding principles of epic theatre. If we do as Brecht did at the *Edward II* rehearsals in 1924 and look at epic theatre through the prism of cabaret, the influence of the latter on the former becomes evident.

In terms of the way plays were constructed, Brecht proposed the adoption of an episodic structure which challenged the assumption that one thing *necessarily* follows on from another. He opposed his epic theatre with 'each scene for itself' to the 'dramatic theatre' where 'one scene makes another', and argued for 'a radical *separation of the elements*' (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 37). How this worked in practice becomes clear from his description of *The Threepenny Opera*:

Its most striking innovation lay in the strict separation of the music from all the other elements of entertainment offered. Even superficially this was evident from the fact that the small orchestra was installed visibly on the stage. For the singing of the *songs* a special change of lighting was arranged; the orchestra was lit up; the titles of the various numbers were projected on the screens at the back . . .; and the actors changed their positions before the number began.

(*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 85)

An evening's cabaret programme was organised in a similar fashion. A series of stand-alone acts would be presented in such a way that, though each performance was separate, there was still a relationship, thematic, stylistic or otherwise, between the disparate elements of the programme. The role of the *conférencier* would be central to this, providing interludes and introductions to the acts to ensure the coherence of the whole. That is to say that he operated, like the songs in a Brecht play or the *Spruchbänder* (banners) used to announce the action of a scene in advance, to provide the linkage between the individual scenes. The *conférencier* would also be responsible for providing an objective commentary upon the acts, highlighting their particular significance or relevance and advancing the argument contained therein, much as the songs and *Spruchbänder* in Brecht's plays do.

The use of *Spruchbänder* could have been inspired by Brecht's love of early silent cinema, resembling the written intertitles between scenes of the films,



4 Valentin's *Das Christbaumbrett* in performance

but the case could easily be made that popular theatre forms such as the cabaret or the ballad singers with their illustrative placards were equally influential in this respect. Knowing what we do about the importance of the 1924 production of *Edward II* in the development of the principles of epic theatre, it is interesting that the local critics were particularly impressed by the innovative approach of having 'the scene titles and dates announced before each episode' in what Willett and Manheim describe as Brecht's 'ballad-like conception of the story'.¹⁸

Brecht used careful stage groupings to give clarity to the narrative and particularly the *Gestus* of the scene and the individuals within it, their social relationships to each other and the action. In this respect, he was also showing the influence of cabaret. He called himself a 'copyist' of Valentin's stage groupings (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 224) and the evidence for this can be seen in *Das Christbaumbrett*, which, as Denis Calandra points out, boasts arrangements strikingly similar to those used by Brecht in his 1931 production of *Man is Man*.¹⁹

The production photos clearly show a careful grouping of the characters. Valentin is centre stage holding the two planks, which take up most of the stage, and the other characters are bunched around the edge of the stage, so emphasising the limitations of space within the 'house'. However, the characters are also arranged according to an aesthetic consideration. The

children are all grouped together on one side, striking similar poses, whilst the giant chimney sweep stands in contrast on the opposite side of the stage. In addition, Valentin and his planks separate the mother from the children, seemingly drawing attention to the domestic chaos that he has created. However, the characters are also arranged *across* the stage, using its width more than its depth, so that every character is visible to the audience, in spite of the crowded stage. Photographs of group acts on cabaret stages show a similar use of a linear arrangement of performers. As with Brecht, for the cabaret performer everything must be seen and nothing should be obscured.

Songs and comedy

The influence of cabaret song on particular plays like *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny* is obvious; but beyond this, Brecht believed that there was something inherent in the music of cabaret which made it particularly suitable for his work. He argued that ‘so-called “cheap” music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta’ is ‘gestic’, in that it ‘allows the actor to exhibit certain basic gestic on the stage’. Serious music, meanwhile, ‘still clings to lyricism, and cultivates expression for its own sake’ (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 87).

The comedy of cabaret was another important influence. One of the things that must have drawn Brecht to Karl Valentin was the way the comic turned the conventional rules of language and logic inside out. In his breakthrough routine *Das Aquarium*, for example, Valentin tells the audience that in his house ‘there’s a staircase that goes up to the first floor, and it also goes back down again, only it’s not the staircase that goes up, we’re the ones that go up, *on* the staircase, it’s just a figure of speech’. Later in the routine, he says that his goldfish had fallen onto the floor, qualifying this by explaining, ‘because in the room where the aquarium is we’ve got a floor’.²⁰ This kind of comic incongruity exactly fits Brecht’s description of the *Verfremdungseffekt* as ‘turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected’ (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 143).

The connection between Valentin’s comedy and Brecht’s *Verfremdung* becomes very clear in a gag in the film they made together, *Mysterien eines Frisiersalons*. At one point, two characters fight a duel with swords. Halfway through, there’s an intertitle which reads ‘*Kampfpause*’ (literally ‘fight break’). They calmly sit down and have a break, and one of them offers the other a light as they smoke cigarettes. It is a classic Brechtian joke: two types of ordinary behaviour, fighting and having breaks (and a real fight and

a sporting event), are defamiliarised by having one incongruously applied to the other. It brings to mind Brecht's acting exercises, where the actors have to play a scene in which two women calmly fold linen while feigning a 'wild and jealous quarrel' for the benefit of their husbands in the next room, or 'come to blows as they fold their linen in silence' (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 129).

Valentin was also keen on gags which broke the theatrical illusion, and there were some of these in the sketches he performed in *Die rote Zibebe*. In *Das Christbaumbrett*, Liesl Karlstadt finishes a telephone call to Valentin, who has just arrived at the market, and before she puts down the receiver, there's a knock on the door and there he is back at home. 'Ah, there you are! I've just been talking to you on the phone and here you are already!' she says. 'Yeah, I just hung up and came right over,' he replies.²¹ This sketch was preceded by a piece in which Valentin rode around the stage on a penny-farthing. It concluded with what was announced as 'a death-defying journey through dark and murky night', in which he rode through a paper banner bearing the words 'dark and murky night'.²² It is not difficult to see why Brecht liked this kind of thing, or its connection with his theatrical theories.

Cabaret performance

In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, Brecht makes a vital point: 'One shouldn't overlook the fact that it's not the play but the performance that is the real purpose of all one's efforts' (p. 74). This was certainly true of cabaret. Great writers like Kurt Tucholsky, Walter Mehring and Erich Kästner may have contributed excellent scripts, but it was the moment of performance that was crucial to cabaret's success, with its electric connection between performer and audience.

Cabaret performers tended to work not by portraying characters with a psychological realism based on empathy and emotionalism but by appearing in the guise of their offstage self (or a persona based on it) and addressing the audience directly. As Trude Hesterberg put it, 'The impact of cabaret songs comes especially from the personality who "puts it across".'²³ One of the things that impressed Brecht so much about Valentin was that his comedy was based on his personality as it came across onstage: 'When Karl Valentin, in some noisy beer hall or other, performs with a deadly seriousness against the chaotic noise of beer glasses, singers and chair legs, one immediately gets the impression that this man will not tell any jokes. He is himself a joke.' With a deadpan style and a persona based on 'composure, stupidity and the pleasure of living', Valentin could 'make donkeys laugh' and reflect deeply on 'the *inadequacy of all things*'. Crucially, he also rejected 'cheap psychology'.²⁴

Cabaret performers owed their success to those qualities which are so hard to pin down: energy, presence and charisma. Brecht himself had his fair share of these when he sang his songs. His musical talents were rather mixed: contemporary accounts suggest his guitar playing was basic, instinctive and effective, and recordings of his singing reveal a voice which was far from pretty. Nonetheless, the way he actually performed the songs was highly charismatic, as Max Hohenester recalled: ‘An irresistible force emanated from the slight, restless figure of the young Brecht . . . He didn’t sing well but with infectious passion, drunk on his own verses, ideas and images as other people are on wine, and intoxicating his listeners as only youth can.’²⁵

Brecht’s singing could certainly make an impression. His schoolmate and fellow medical student Otto Muellereisert said Brecht’s singing got him ‘ninety per cent of his women’.²⁶ More importantly, it also got him his booking at Hesterberg’s Wilde Bühne. When he arrived at her flat for his audition, she was not overwhelmed by her first sight of him: ‘Except for some pimples on his face and long, slender hands that stuck out of his jacket, which was much too short, there was nothing about him to make any special impression.’ However, when he started to sing, she was entranced: ‘And then, in the melancholy November atmosphere of my rented middle-class flat, the first bars of “The Dead Soldier” and “Josef Apfelböck” rang out, and Bert Brecht’s coarse voice cast a spell over it all . . .’²⁷

Wedekind the performer

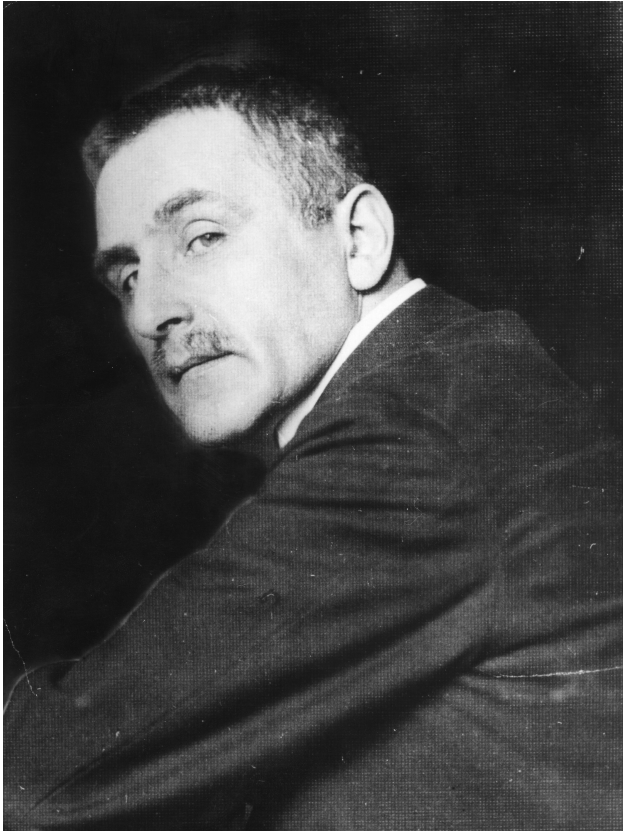
Just as Brecht could cast a spell over others, so he was entranced by Frank Wedekind. It is well known that Brecht admired Wedekind, but this was less a cool, intellectual appreciation, more a kind of hot-blooded hero worship. The two men actually met only once, when Brecht engineered the exchange of a few words. He had arrived early for one of Wedekind’s performances, to find his idol nervously pacing between the seats, as Hanns Otto Münsterer recalled: ‘Brecht stepped out, probably on purpose, into the path of the oncoming Wedekind – who promptly ran straight into him. “I do beg your pardon,” he said raising his hat, and steamed on. That at least was Brecht’s story, and he was quite pleased with himself for having managed to elicit even this greeting from the great master.’²⁸

When the ‘great master’ died in 1918, Brecht attended his funeral and wrote to Caspar Neher about it: ‘I even saw him in his coffin. One of the biggest surprises I’ve ever had: around his mouth he looked like a little boy. Gone were the self-satisfied, precious line of the lips, the surfeited, cynical look.’²⁹ Shortly afterwards, Brecht had his hair cut much shorter, adopting

the style he had admired in Wedekind. The following year, he named his first son Frank in honour of his hero.

There is no doubt that part of the appeal was the writing. In 1912, Brecht's father had given him a copy of the Georg Müller edition of Wedekind's complete works, and by 1918 it was 'nothing if not well-thumbed'.³⁰ Wedekind's influence is there in Brecht's writing, and it has been noted that *Baal* is a kind of reworking of the Lulu plays.³¹ Brecht also loved Wedekind's songs, and it is not difficult to see the connection between Wedekind's '*Der Tantenmörder*' ('The Aunt-Killer'), in which a young man remorselessly murders his aunt and steals her gold, and Brecht's '*Apfelböck*', in which a young man kills his parents for no reason and continues living in the house while their corpses rot in the linen press. However, what really excited Brecht about Wedekind was his performance. As a young playwright, Wedekind had been fascinated by popular theatre. He had become friendly with the clown W. W. Rudinoff, worked backstage at circuses in Paris and attended shows at the Middlesex Music Hall in London. Then, in 1901, he started to appear in cabaret, a new type of theatre consciously modelled on popular forms like music hall. He first appeared at the Elf Scharfrichter shortly after its foundation in 1901, singing his own songs to his own accompaniment on the guitar and lute. He was an extremely effective cabaret performer, with a harsh voice and a powerful stage presence, and appearances at the Elf Scharfrichter brought him much-needed money as well as kudos. He continued to sing in various cabarets on and off for the rest of his career.

Brecht saw Wedekind perform on a number of occasions. While a student in Munich, he attended seminars on theatre conducted by Artur Kutscher, Wedekind's friend and biographer. Thus he gained some quite close contact with his hero, hearing him speak and sing at a farewell party given by members of the seminar. He also saw Wedekind performing in cabarets like the Bonbonnière, acting in the plays he had authored, and giving a reading of his final work, *Herakles*. Wedekind's performance had a clear impact on Brecht. It seems likely that he modelled his own singing style on that of his hero. Certainly, the description of Wedekind's singing in the obituary he wrote – 'a brittle voice, monotonous and quite untrained' – could equally well apply to his own, as heard on recordings of songs from *The Threepenny Opera*. Moreover, Brecht's writing on Wedekind pays far more attention to his performance than to his plays. He wrote passionately about his charisma and his performance energy: 'No singer ever gave me such a shock, such a thrill. It was the man's intense aliveness, the energy which allowed him to defy sniggering ridicule and proclaim his brazen hymn to humanity, that also gave him this personal magic. He seemed indestructible.' He also described an intense connection with the audience: 'His vitality was his finest



5 Frank Wedekind in 1910

characteristic. He had only to enter a lecture-room full of hundreds of noisy students, or a room, or a stage, with his special walk, his sharp-cut bronze skull slightly tilted and thrust forward, and there was silence.' Perhaps most importantly, Brecht noted that Wedekind's 'greatest work was his own personality' (*Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 3–4).

In any form of variety-type theatre, the performer's personality tends to form the basis of the act and when Wedekind began his cabaret career, his notoriety meant that he had a ready-made persona. Whereas other members of the Elf Scharfrichter took on sinister stage names like 'Dionysius Tod' (Death) or 'Till Blut' (Blood), the scandalous content of Wedekind's plays and a prison sentence for lese-majesty had made his surname intimidating enough in its own right. There was no apparent gap between the electrifying performer on the cabaret stage, holding audiences rapt with murderous songs, and the offstage man. Indeed, Wedekind made efforts to maintain his notorious public image in his everyday life, regularly asking young women



6 Frank and Tilly Wedekind in *Earth Spirit*

if they were still virgins and hiding ill-fitting dentures with a habitual teeth-baring leer.

What makes Wedekind's performance such an important influence on Brecht's ideas of theatre is that he not only appeared in cabaret but also acted in his own plays. Brecht loved Wedekind's acting and would imitate his portrayal of Dr Schön in *Erdgeist* (*Earth Spirit*). He wrote that his acting was technically weak, but that it had a different kind of power:

He was not a particularly good actor (he even kept forgetting the limp which he himself had prescribed, and couldn't remember his lines), but as Marquis von Keith he put the professionals in the shade. He filled every corner with his personality. There he stood, ugly, brutal, dangerous, with close-cropped red hair, his hands in his trouser pockets, and one felt that the devil himself couldn't shift him.

(*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 3)

As Brecht noted, Wedekind acted in ‘a style which he had developed in cabaret’.³² The characterisation may have been shoddy, but there was charisma and vitality and, crucially, the performer’s own personality was on show.

The idea that the actor should be visible in the role is a cornerstone of Brecht’s theatre and the work of cabaret performers in general and Wedekind in particular seems to be the origin of this. Perhaps to help them make their personalities more visible on stage, Brecht ‘set out to give his actors as much fame as possible in their own eyes’, in spite of the fact that they lacked ‘real fame’. With this in mind, he wrote a poem to Carola Neher encouraging her to wash every morning like a famous person. The result of this kind of encouragement was that although his actors were only ‘reasonably famous’, they ‘came before the audience on the stage as if they were a great deal more so’.³³ Perhaps the best example Brecht gave of the actor’s personality being visible onstage was Charles Laughton as Galileo: ‘[T]he actor appears onstage in a double role . . . the showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo whom he is showing . . . Laughton is actually there, standing on stage and showing us what he imagines Galileo to have been.’ (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 194)

Physical presence

Because forms like cabaret involve performers presenting themselves as personalities, this places a greater emphasis on their own particular physicality. Unlike actors who use costume and make-up to represent somebody else, the cabaret performer tends to represent him- or herself. As a result, face, hair-style, voice, turn of phrase, body shape, stance and mannerisms all become an important part of the texture of the act and in some indefinable way contribute to those slippery qualities of presence and charisma. This is something that Brecht seemed to grasp instinctively. His accounts of Wedekind’s performances are full of physical description, mentioning his ‘special walk’, his ‘sharp-cut bronze skull slightly tilted and thrust forward’ and his ‘close-cropped red hair’. It is implicit in the way that he mentions these that it was the special walk and the tilt of the skull that allowed him to silence the lecture room full of noisy students.

Performers’ exploitation of their particular physical qualities was something that Brecht admired in the actors he worked with. He even wrote a poem about Charles Laughton’s belly, describing it as being ‘built of foods which he/At his leisure had selected, for his entertainment’ and praising the actor for performing his belly ‘like a poem’.³⁴ Some cabaret acts placed an even greater emphasis on physicality, particularly dancers like Valeska Gert.



7 Valeska Gert performing *Canaille*

Brecht was a great admirer of Gert's abstract, expressive form of dance and invited her to appear with him in *Die rote Zibebe*. Here she danced a piece called *Canaille*, in which she wore long, black stockings, pink garters and high-heeled shoes to represent 'an ultra-refined whore'. After a series of hip wiggles, jerks and spasms, she physically showed the excitement ebbing away to be replaced by disgust and disdain, as if to say, 'What's been happening to me? I've been exploited. My body's been abused because I need money.' She later described the piece using Brechtian terminology: 'I was dancing coitus, but I "alienated" it, as people say nowadays.'³⁵ It is not hard to see the connection between this kind of act and Brecht's notion of *Gestus*, the physical gesture which reveals a deeper social truth.

Demolishing the fourth wall

Another feature of cabaret performance that appealed to Brecht was that it is based very much in the here and now. Whereas fourth-wall theatre is based on the idea that we are seeing events from another place and time, cabaret never loses sight of the present moment and the particular venue in which it takes place. Cabaret performers were happy to improvise and break out of scripted material to chat with the audience. Joachim Ringelnatz recalled how Kathi Kobus, who ran and compèred Munich's *Simplicissimus* cabaret,

would break out of a poem to say to a waitress, 'The gent wants to pay!' or to a customer, 'Come on in, there's still a seat over here.'³⁶ Brecht embraced this kind of approach to performing, writing in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*: 'Spoiling the illusion, moreover, was something the Augsburgers judged leniently. He was against illusion. On his stage there were private jokes, improvisations and extemporizations such as would have been unthinkable in the old theatre' (p. 71).

Direct address was prevalent in cabaret, particularly in the case of the *conférenciers*, throwing out barbed topical gags as well as introducing the acts. Brecht liked this kind of direct communication between performer and audience. The theatrically conservative 'Actor' character in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* reacts with horror at the idea of direct address, saying, 'That's official, is it, that from now on we can look down at you and even talk to you?' The wise 'Philosopher' responds, 'Of course. Any time it furthers the demonstration' (p. 52). An example of this furthering of the demonstration can be found in *Man is Man*, where the actor playing Widow Begbick turns to the audience and explains, 'Tonight you are going to see a man reassembled like a car . . . Herr Bertolt Brecht hopes you'll feel the ground on which you stand/Slither between your toes like shifting sand.'³⁷

But Brecht's desire to 'demolish the fourth wall'³⁸ involved more than just changing the way the actors connected with the audience; he also wanted to change the nature of the audience itself. He wrote about conventional theatre audiences in luxuriantly scathing terms:

Looking about us, we see somewhat motionless figures in a peculiar condition: they seem strenuously to be tensing all their muscles, except where these are flabby and exhausted. They scarcely communicate with each other; their relations are those of a lot of sleepers . . . True, their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look as if in a trance . . .

(*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 187)

In stark contrast, cabaret audiences were lively and active. Trude Hesterberg pointed out, 'The precise effect a cabaret song may have is never to be predicted under any circumstances; it depends entirely upon the audience.'³⁹ This is crucial: the audience's response was central to the success or failure of an item on a cabaret bill, and their regular participation in the form of laughter, applause and heckling put them in a much more powerful position than in straight theatre. Indeed, the unruliness of cabaret audiences was parodied in the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*, which printed advice for potential punters, such as: 'Sit down haphazardly and noisily'; 'Read the menu and wine list loudly and noisily to your companion'; and 'Place your loud interruptions exactly where they don't fit.'⁴⁰ Perhaps the most extreme

example of audience power is Erwin Lowinsky's *Kabarett der Namenlosen*, which opened in Berlin in 1926. Here, unsuspecting amateurs were offered the big chance of being able to perform before a public audience, only to be insulted by Lowinsky as *conférencier*, and heckled, jeered and laughed off the stage by the audience.

When Brecht experienced the worst effects of the power of cabaret audiences at the *Wilde Bühne*, his reaction to the near-riot he had provoked was significant. Hesterberg remembered: 'Quietly, amiably, young Brecht asked me why I had rung down the curtain. I said, "Didn't you hear what was going on out there?" And Brecht simply replied, "So what?"'⁴¹ Lacking the crestfallen attitude which such an ego-crushing experience would usually inflict on a performer, the young playwright evidently saw this kind of confrontation as a legitimate part of the whole experience. Certainly, it was preferable to the stupefied trance of the straight theatre. Brecht wanted an audience like Valentin's, where people ate, drank and smoked as they watched. He fantasised about stirring up the audiences for his plays by hiring two clowns to pretend to be spectators, bandying opinions about other audience members, making comments about the play and placing bets on its outcome.

It has been pointed out that Brecht's enthusiasm for performers like Wedekind, who enjoyed an intense rapport with his audience based on his 'personal magic', might seem at odds with his ideas about distancing the audience from the action on the stage.⁴² However, there is no contradiction. Brecht was against theatrical illusion and a closeness based on empathy, where audiences would share the emotions of the characters. The closeness in cabaret was different: an encounter between performer and audience, where each played an active role. The performer's energy and charisma might hold an audience rapt, but nobody lost sight of the fact that they were participating in an entertainment event, and the audience had the power to make its judgement known in the form of laughter and applause. Brecht had no problem with this kind of direct rapport and he explicitly argued that, 'a theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense' (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 7).

He was not the only one who realised the subversive potential of this kind of close performer–audience relationship. There were also significant cases where it aroused the suspicions of the authorities. In the early 1920s, Celly de Reidt was fined for obscenity when a complaint was made about the nudity in her cabaret. This nudity was deemed inartistic and dangerous, specifically because the audience 'finds itself in almost immediate contact with the performers'.⁴³ Perhaps more significantly, throughout the 1930s the Nazi government became increasingly angry about the satirical quips which

cabaret *conférenciers* were making at its expense, and it made a number of interventions aimed at censoring their activities. By 1941 Goebbels's patience was exhausted and he issued an order which banned not only such quips but the very role of the *conférencier*: 'Any and every so-called *conférencier* performance or commentary is immediately and fundamentally forbidden for the entire public.'⁴⁴ Direct address, it seems, was seen as dangerous in its own right.

Pleasure

Brecht was not unique in taking techniques from such popular forms as cabaret. Playwrights and intellectuals were drawing inspiration from this kind of popular theatre as early as the 1880s, when Wedekind wrote an essay, 'Zirkusgedanken', on the importance of circus. Indeed, the German cabaret tradition itself was created by artists as an attempt to bring refinement and higher artistic values to the variety-based theatre which had started in Britain with the music hall and spread to Germany in the form of *Variétés*, *Singspielhallen* and *Tingeltangel*. The founders of the Elf Scharfrichter wrote a manifesto in 1900–1901 in which they stated their goal of 'putting all arts in the service of light entertainment which, up to now, has been offered exclusively by low quality vaudevilles'.⁴⁵

As a result, cabaret involved a kind of cultural mobility, where serious (if scandalous) playwrights like Wedekind could slum it by performing a turn, or popular comedians like Valentin could be elevated by performing alongside Brecht at the Munich Kammerspiele. This mingling of high and low art was not always happy. In spite of his success at the Elf Scharfrichter, Wedekind referred to cabaret as 'all this junk' and left the group in 1903 when his plays seemed to be gaining more success. It was only the need to earn a living which forced him to resume his cabaret career. Brecht had no such problems because he took a different approach from the pioneers of German cabaret. Rather than adopting the form *per se*, he adapted it to his own medium. Instead of becoming a fully fledged cabaret performer, he took its techniques and applied them to conventional theatre. This was revolutionary, and incomprehensible to some. Lotte Lenya recalled how 'well-known Berlin theatre-prophets' tried to write off *The Threepenny Opera* as 'neither cabaret nor drama, but a bit of each'.⁴⁶

Drawing from cabaret clearly contributed to Brecht's political agenda for theatre, providing models for *Gestus* and the *Verfremdungseffekt*, but perhaps more importantly it allowed him to declare his aesthetic preferences. One of the things Brecht loathed about the theatre of emotion and empathy was that it did not contain 'five pennyworth of *fun*' (*Brecht on Theatre*,

p. 7). By contrast, cabaret with its smoky atmosphere, its lively, satirical songs, its evocation of sexuality, its topical jokes, and above all its close rapport between energetic performers and noisy, powerful audiences, had fun in abundance. In bringing these qualities to theatre, he was fulfilling its fundamental purpose: 'From the first it has been the theatre's business to entertain people.' This was, he believed, even more important than instruction because 'nothing needs less justification than pleasure' (*Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 180–81).

NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 115.
- 2 Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 69.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 4 The exact time of their first meeting is uncertain, but it can be safely assumed that this occurred not long after Brecht's arrival in Munich as a student in October 1917, since by 1919 Brecht and Valentin were sufficiently close for Brecht to be performing as a 'clarinettist' in Valentin's *Oktoberfestbude* (see Klaus Völker, *Brecht: A Biography*, p. 36).
- 5 See Klaus Budzinski, *Das Kabarett* (ECON Taschenbuch: Düsseldorf, 1985), p. 32.
- 6 Brecht, *Diaries 1920–1922*, pp. 152–53.
- 7 Hesterberg, quoted in Klaus Budzinski, *Pfeffer ins Getriebe: Ein Streifzug durch 100 Jahre Kabarett*, (Wilhelm Heine: Munich, 1982), p. 133.
- 8 See Budzinski, *Pfeffer ins Getriebe*, p. 134; and J. M. Ritchie, 'Brecht and Cabaret' in *Brecht in Perspective*, ed. Bartram and Waine, pp. 160–74.
- 9 Reinhard Hippen, '*Sich fügen – heißt lügen*' – 80 Jahre deutsches Kabarett (Druckhaus Schmidt und Bödige: Mainz, 1981), p. 30.
- 10 Völker, *Brecht: A Biography*, p. 36.
- 11 Arguably the play also anticipates the drunken engagement party scene in the film *Kuble Wampe*.
- 12 Hanns Otto Münsterer, *The Young Brecht*, p. 106.
- 13 Völker, *Brecht: A Biography*, p. 61.
- 14 Literally, 'The Christmas Tree Board'. However, 'Brettl' is also used idiomatically to mean 'a stage' and is particularly associated with cabaret and popular theatre forms.
- 15 Budzinski, *Das Kabarett*, p. 260.
- 16 W. Stuart McDowell, 'Actors on Brecht: The Munich Years' in *Brecht Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial, p. 77.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 18 Brecht, *Collected Plays I, 1918–23*, p. x.
- 19 Denis Calandra, 'Karl Valentin and Bertolt Brecht' in *The Drama Review*, 18 (March 1974), p. 91.
- 20 'The Aquarium', transl. Michael Wilson and Oliver Double, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 79 (August 2004), p. 207.
- 21 Translation by the authors.
- 22 Münsterer, *The Young Brecht*, p. 105.

- 23 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II*, p. 82.
- 24 Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater V*, p. 161.
- 25 Ronald Hayman, *Brecht: A Biography*, p. 19.
- 26 Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, p. 11.
- 27 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II*, pp. 82–3. Note that the central character in Brecht's 'Apfelböck' is actually called Jakob, not Josef.
- 28 Münsterer, *The Young Brecht*, p. 24.
- 29 Brecht, *Letters 1913–1956*, p. 37.
- 30 Münsterer, *The Young Brecht*, p. 23.
- 31 See Hayman, *Brecht: A Biography*, p. 29; and Sol Gittleman, *Frank Wedekind* (Twayne: New York, 1969), p. 138.
- 32 *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 69.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 70, The poem he wrote for Neher is 'Advice to the actress CN'.
- 34 Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, p. 393.
- 35 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II*, pp. 15–16.
- 36 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume I*, p. 121.
- 37 Brecht, *Man equals Man*, p. 38.
- 38 *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 52.
- 39 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II*, p. 82.
- 40 Lisa Appignanesi, *Cabaret*, p. 55.
- 41 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II*, p. 83.
- 42 See Margaret Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, p. 9, for example.
- 43 Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, p. 160.
- 44 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II*, p. 282.
- 45 Peter Jelavich, *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting, and Performance 1890–1914* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 151.
- 46 Hubert Witt (ed.), *Brecht As They Knew Him*, p. 61.

