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Bertolt Brecht and the Socialist Origins of West German Theater

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Abstract:

The dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was among the most polarizing figures in all of postwar German history. A committed socialist, Brecht settled in East Berlin following WWII and founded the Berliner Ensemble. Theater directors in West Germany (FRG) boycotted Brecht's plays during the 1953 uprising in East Germany (GDR) and again in response to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as a way of castigating the young socialist governments. In the aftermath of the 1968 student protests Brecht became a hero of the New Left but by the 1980s a younger generation began to consider his works representative of an outmoded, orthodox Marxism. The scholarly narrative contends that the GDR was economically progressive but culturally conservative; in Brecht's hands, however, what is often derisively referred to as socialist realism was profoundly expressive and politically dissenting. Brecht's influence on FRG culture is a story that has yet to be told. By comparing theater productions in the GDR and the FRG this paper reveals that the very tactics viewed as cheap or socialist in East German theaters were hailed as avant-garde in West German theaters by the very same FRG critics. Material shortages faced by Brecht's production team forced them to use lighting and choreography in innovative ways when elaborate sets were not affordable. Their use of projected images was taken up by dozens of theaters in the FRG. West German theaters also mobilized their audiences, involved them in participatory scenes, staged dramas in alternative locations, and championed the collective theater model pioneered by Brecht. This paper argues that what has long been considered an avant-garde West German theater aesthetic was in fact fundamentally Brechtian with its very foundation in GDR culture.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht, socialist realism, theater, set design, Cold War, West Germany

The dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was among the most polarizing figures in all of postwar German history. A committed socialist, Brecht settled in East Berlin following WWII and founded the Berliner Ensemble. Theater directors in West Germany (FRG) boycotted Brecht's plays during the 1953 uprising in East Germany (GDR) and again in response to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as a way of castigating the young socialist governments. In the aftermath of the 1968 student protests Brecht became a hero of the New Left but by the 1980s a younger generation began to consider his works representative of an outmoded, orthodox Marxism. The scholarly narrative contends that the GDR was economically progressive but culturally conservative; in Brecht's hands, however, what is often derisively referred to as socialist realism could be profoundly expressive and politically dissenting.

The divide between East and West German theater in the scholarly literature is easily overstated. Theater historian David Ashley Hughes argues that even though theater has played a key role in the definition of German culture since the age of Goethe and Schiller, it was particularly important in West Germany, "where questions of German national identity were driven underground after the Hitler years, the theater became a crucial mechanism for promoting social cohesion and community."ⁱ The situation in East Germany was not so different. Carl Weber, a former member of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, points out that since the 1970s theater in East and West Germany had many similarities. Both were subsidized by the state as part of a system reaching back to the eighteenth century, and many GDR actors and directors received permits to work in both German states.ⁱⁱ In both Germanys theater remained exclusive and was never truly mass art. Both Germanys also grappled with the legacy of Brecht. Brecht's influence on FRG culture is a story that has yet to be told.

During the Weimar period, Brecht worked on representing the complex relationships of capitalist society in dramatic form. In his 1930 essay, "The Modern Theater is Epic Theater," Brecht calls for an intensification of the component elements of a production: word, music and set design. In the epic theater, set design is supposed to take on the nature of discreet works of visual art within the theater, not to serve as a mere backdrop. Brecht believed such exaggerations indicated the labor involved in the production and could therefore present individuals as socially constructed and malleable. He also attempted to de-school actors and shake them from their familiar theater habits in order to make characters, objects, and scenarios *verfremd* [distanced]. During the Second World War he fled to Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and finally the

United States. From 1948 until his death in 1956, he lived and worked in the Mitte neighborhood of former East Berlin, where he directed the Berliner Ensemble. In the FRG, Brecht's work was often dismissed on grounds of orthodox Marxism, while in the GDR, Brecht was criticized for veering too far from the official conception of socialist realism.

In 1954 Brecht defined socialist realism as follows:

"Socialist Realism means realistically reproducing men's lives from a socialist point of view. It is reproduced in such a way as to promote insight into society's mechanisms and stimulate socialist impulses... A Socialist Realist work of art shows characters and events as historical and alterable, and as contradictory."ⁱⁱⁱ

The State might have approved of Brecht's definition of socialist realism but his plays were constantly suspect due to their overarching critiques of institutional structures and the spontaneity for which they call.

Socialist realism had been the state-mandated style of the Soviet Union since April 1933. Its official definition, however, changed as it spread among the satellite states during the Cold War and it was inconsistently enforced. Official definitions made use of such vague rhetoric that the authorities could ultimately take out of public view anything they wanted on grounds that it fell outside the tenets of socialist realism. The former president of the East German Akademie der Künste and celebrated poet, Johannes R. Becher, held that socialist realism offered people a moral example to follow and could not be defined solely in formal terms nor could it be separated from a humanistic view of the world.^{iv} The Marxist-Leninist scholar of aesthetics at Humboldt University, Erwin Pracht was more ideological but equally vague in terms of what the term could include.^v Friedrich Engels described socialist realism *avant la lettre* in 1888 as striving to portray the daily life of the working class.^{vi} Given the variation in these understandings of the term, one can appreciate the complexity of the decisions Brecht and his production team made daily.

Following Stalin's death in 1953 there was a 'thaw' of cultural policy in the Eastern Bloc, which allowed GDR artists to adapt the rules of socialist realism. The rules were further relaxed in 1956 following Khrushchev's so-called secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which he was harshly critical of Stalin. Socialist realism lost the strictness associated with the Stalin years and regained some of the avant-garde character for which many artists still living in East Germany had once been known. In 1957 the art historian Wolfgang Hütte published an essay called "Der kritische Realismus in Deutschland," in the East German periodical, *Bildende Kunst*, which argued that realism is not always didactic or straightforward. This is apparent in the paintings of GDR artists Wolfgang Matheuer, Bernard Heisig, Werner Tübke, Willi Sitte, Gerhard Altenbourg, and A.R. Penck.

Many of prewar Germany's most radical artists returned to East Germany in the late 1940s and early 50s under the assumption that it would be the more progressive state. Brecht's decision to return from exile to East Germany coupled with his well-known Marxist orientation, however, prompted West German theater audiences to affix Brecht's plays to the actions of the socialist government. This led to boycotts of Brecht's work in moments of political tension such as the GDR worker's uprising in 1953, the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.^{vii} Brecht's reception changed on both sides of the wall after his death in 1956, particularly with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s. The renewed interest in Brecht arose from a desire to interrogate the lingering of fascism in contemporary postwar society and to question the ultimate toll of capitalism; however the consequences of this revival were not all positive. Critics and historians of theater have noted that by the mid-1970s Brecht's plays had been assimilated into mainstream culture.^{viii} He was studied and performed in the East and West for different reasons but as a classic rather than a dissident. Brecht became standard on school curricula and directors produced his plays based on dramaturgical and visual models of what he had done during his lifetime instead of on their particular social situation. Neither Germany ever entirely stopped staging Brecht's plays though and his theories continued to inform dramaturgical decisions on both sides of the iron curtain.^{ix}

Brecht argued that new technologies were part of the fabric of our lives, so if theater aimed to offer its audiences authenticity, it had to take into account the technological developments that determine that audience's conception of authenticity. If the audience was trained to process information via the technical means of film and radio, then those means had to be incorporated into theater and opera production, and the stage designer took on an expanded role to meet the visual demands of the epic theater. As early as 1924, Brecht and the theater director Erwin Piscator were already experimenting with the projected image on stage. After WWII Brecht continued working with film and still projections alongside set designers John Heartfield (*Mutter Courage*, Berliner Ensemble 1954) and Caspar Neher (*Furcht und*

Elend des III. Reiches, Basler Stadttheater 1947).^x In this way Brecht presaged productions such as the controversial 1979 *Hamlet* at the Schauspielhaus Köln, directed by Hansgünther Heyme and designed by Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell, in which characters were equipped with radio transmitters and portable televisions and delivered key monologues into a rolling video camera, which then projected their image on monitors along the stage floor. Countless artists in and outside Germany throughout the Cold War made use of projected images. The visual parallels are particularly striking between John Heartfield's use of projection in *Lenin Poem* from 1965 at the Volksbühne in East Berlin and Robert Wilson's designs for *Einstein on the Beach* in 1976, which was seen in much of Western Europe and the United States, including Avignon, Hamburg, Paris, Belgrade, Venice, Brussels, Rotterdam, and New York. While Brecht's use of the projected image stemmed from a desire to use the new media of contemporary life and also from a lack of financial resources, the same tactic was used in West Germany for entirely different reasons and with an entirely different reception.^{xi} Brecht's colleagues and students were also perhaps drawn to the projected image because it entailed only a fraction of the cost of building three-dimensional set pieces. Material shortages faced by Brecht's production team forced them to use lighting and choreography in innovative ways when elaborate sets were not affordable. Carl Weber claims that for East German theaters, "many of the most expensive gadgets were simply not available to them. Directors and designers were forced to be inventive and to do more with less."^{xii} What is surprising is that this same strategy became popular in West German theaters and that today it is still used in theaters and opera houses all over the world.

The problem of using terms such as "East German art" or "West German theater" are even more apparent in the career of Brecht's pupil, Achim Freyer. Freyer trained in East Berlin at the *Akademie der Künste* and under Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble but rose to prominence in West Germany and eventually Western Europe. Freyer and the director Claus Peymann staged Goethe's *Faust* in Stuttgart in a 1978 production that was hailed by West German newspapers as shocking and avant-garde, yet it made use of the same Brechtian devices at times mocked or boycotted by those very presses.^{xiii} The scholarly literature and critical reviews of this production are so focused on how revolutionary it was, for uniting both parts of the drama, for staging sections in the foyer and forcing the audience into the drama itself, that they rarely acknowledged that nearly a decade earlier, in 1966, *Faust* had already been staged in East Berlin by Wolfgang Heinz and Adolf Dresen at the Deutsches Theater. Literature and theater scholars lauded the Stuttgart production for casting the work as a comedy rather than a tragedy. Either they did not know or they willfully ignored that this move was already made in 1966 in East Berlin with the Heinz-Dresen production. The interpretation of *Faust* as a comedy rather than a tragedy was picked up on West German stages several more times in the 1970s but was done first in East Berlin. Humor, a central component of Brecht's epic theater, and was used here to update a classical text.

The greatest debt West German theater and performance art in the postwar period owes to Brecht is related to his technique of incorporating the audience into the dramatic action as active rather than passive observers. In Bremen, West Germany, in the mid-1960s, set designer Wilfried Minks and director Peter Zadek developed a reputation for re-interpreting classical texts and updating them through the incorporation of pop art into the set design. Among theater critics and historians, this became known as the *Bremer Stil*. In Zadek and Minks' 1965 production of *Frühlings Erwachen*, Minks and Zadek aimed a row of bright track lights at the audience throughout the entire production. Some audience members said they could not concentrate because of it, to which Zadek replied that the audience was so concentrated on not concentrating (aware that others would see if they were fidgeting or sleeping) that they ended up being more concentrated on the stage than ever before. The director says the idea of flooding the audience with light came from Brecht, who believed the sources of lighting should be visible at all times, as in a boxing match. Making the audience visible rather than bathed in darkness plays an important role in the film-studio production of *Mutter Courage* (1970) and *As You like It* by the Schaubühne in West Berlin (1977), the participatory *Faust* in Stuttgart (1978), and especially in the electronic *Hamlet*, in which the audience was projected live onto video screens on stage.^{xiv}

A related *Verfremdungseffekt* used in West Germany was to mobilize the audience, staging a classical piece in an abandoned factory, seating the audience in the round, or having it walk to different locations for various acts. This does not have a specific precedent at the Berliner Ensemble, but it is part of a move initiated by Brecht, which theater historian Karl Bachler described as the move away from passive voyeurism and spectatorship into a condition closer to street theater or a demonstration, in which the stakes are real for everybody present.^{xv} Examples include Alwin Eckert's *Der Fliegende Arzt* in 1973 for the Volksbühne Berlin, Peymann and Freyer's *Faust* in Stuttgart, Ezio Toffolotti's *Das Letzte Paradies* at the Volksbühne Berlin 1973, Holderlin's *Winterreise* in Hitler's Olympic Stadium in West Berlin in 1977, *Die*

Krönung Richards III in an abandoned slaughterhouse in Bremen in 1978, and *Der Untergang der Titanic* in 1979, for which the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin was turned into a cruise liner and the inner courtyard flooded.^{xvi}

One of Brecht's favorite metaphors for the ideal experience of theatergoers was the boxing ring.^{xvii} When spectators attend a boxing match they are not intellectually involved yet watch with anticipation. They also sit in a circular formation that allows them to see the action and each other in the absence of a backstage area or curtains. Several of the most written-about theater productions in the FRG achieved the Brechtian ideal of the boxing ring. In the 1971 West Berlin Schaubühne production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Peter Stein and Karl-Ernst Herrmann invited their audience to a film studio in Spandau and then sent them on a journey through a woody labyrinth after having them stand in the foyer for forty-five minutes, watching a boxing match between a professional boxer and an actor. Critics complained that in the enormous film studio some of the text lines were lost at the top of the bleachers, an effect Brecht might have appreciated. Achim Freyer and Claus Peymann staged the first and fourth scenes of *Faust II* in the upper foyer of the Staatstheater Stuttgart, where, by simply standing in the foyer, the audience became the king's court and then soldiers in a battle led by Faust. Older audience members complained of the physical demands placed on the audience. In 1977 Klaus Michael Grüber staged "Winterreise" from Hölderlin's *Hyperion* in Hitler's Olympic Stadium in Berlin, where some of the text was displayed on a giant electronic scoreboard because it was so difficult to make out from the actor who recited his lines as he ran around the Olympic track and jumped over hurdles. In 1978 Frank-Patrick Steckel staged *Die Krönung Richards III* in a soon-to-be-leveled slaughterhouse in Bremen, where Richard recited some of his lines from the rafters. These mobilizations of the audience come in part from Brecht's practice in East Germany and his theorization of the theater as boxing ring and in part from the traditions of Children's theater and street theater, which were particularly established in the GDR. The many practitioners who moved from East to West Germany brought with them the tradition of using theater to address a reality that exists outside the theater building proper.

The final aspect of East German theater that I will discuss here is the collective theater model. Brecht worked closely with artists, apprentices, dramaturges, and young aspiring directors and recruited student painters and set designers from the East Berlin Akademie der Künste.^{xviii} Theaters in the FRG emulated this model, though perhaps less publicly for fear that their state funding would be reduced. Most of the director-designer teams mentioned in this paper, particularly Peter Zadek and Wilfried Minks in Bremen and Claus Peymann and Achim Freyer in Stuttgart, collapsed the theater's hierarchy, which had historically placed the director above all others. Peter Zadek claims not to remember who did what anymore, that he and Minks shared equally in the creative and conceptual decision-making.^{xix}

At the Schaubühne in West Berlin, socialism was not just a model for collaborative labor but also a way to interpret texts and characters. In 1975, the New York Times devoted an article to the Schaubühne and their collective model titled, "One of Europe's Most Innovative Theaters." The author, Henry Popkin, writes that the Schaubühne,

"...demonstrates the effectiveness of research and group preparation... When Stein became permanently connected with the Schaubühne in 1970, he frankly proclaimed a 'Marxist-Leninist point of view for theater. And today, all the theater's members attend regular seminars on Marxism-Leninism.'"^{xx}

The Schaubühne, a major platform for West German culture, selling between ninety-five and one hundred percent of the seats on any given night in the mid-1970s, was also a microcosm of socialist society within the theater. The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine* described the Schaubühne as, "das erste echte Kollektivtheater," by which one assumes that the author meant first in the FRG because this concept was no longer new in the GDR.^{xxi} When Peter Stein took over the Schaubühne in 1970, he opened with a production of Brecht's *Mother Courage* and a stage that met all of Brecht's criteria for socialist realism. With the New Left and student movements came exceptional skepticism of authority figures and the Schaubühne inspired audiences by avoiding hierarchical organization.^{xxii}

For members of the Schaubühne, collaboration also referred to the physical construction of sets. Here is an image of one of the six actors who split the title role in *Peer Gynt*, with a screwdriver, working on the set's construction. The alpine scenes on the walls were inspired by old cartes de visites and painted by a member of the production team who had no prior painting experience because the chief set designer was occupied with something else.^{xxiii} This model of artistic production values its producers as team members more than as individuals. Benjamin Henrichs of *Die Zeit* claimed that the Schaubühne set the

criteria by which all other German theaters are measured and that it came to such a prominent position through channeling Brecht directly, carrying out a clearly stated theoretical and political position, and developing a system or collective organization and production.^{xxiv}

I will close here with the Schaubühne, a group of actors and artists who spread Marxist and Brechtian principles along their tour path through Western Europe at the height of the Cold War. Although theaters and artists in the FRG did much to popularize Brecht's theory of the theater, and in this paper I have focused on the relation of East and West German cultures, I should also acknowledge a much bigger picture, which reaches beyond Eastern and Western Europe. Before these ideas came to West Germany via East Berlin, they came to Germany via China. Brecht was infatuated with Chinese art and culture and in the 1930s had already revealed that his idea for distancing effects came from Chinese acting methods. Brecht writes,

"Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place ...The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience."^{xxv}

This description of the epic theater describes precisely the reaction of West German theater critics to the productions I have discussed in this paper. I hope these examples have revealed the limits of referring to artists as eastern or western and that what has long been considered an avant-garde West German theater aesthetic owes an enormous debt to Brecht and GDR culture.

Author note:

Samuel Adams is a PhD candidate in art history at the University of Southern California. His dissertation is a study of the intersections of theater and fine arts in post-WWII Germany and is tentatively titled "Studio to Stage: Theatricality in Postwar German Art, 1951-1978." This research is funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, and the USC Provost PhD Fellowship. Samuel has worked as a research assistant at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Getty Research Institute. He has shared his research at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, the International Bauhaus Colloquium in Weimar, the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research at Harvard University, the Association of Art Historians, the German Studies Association, and the Art History Institute at the University of Bern. He has published book and exhibition reviews and a chapter on Wagnerian set design for the volume *Representations of German Identity* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013).

ⁱ David Ashley Hughes, "Notes on the German Theater Crisis," *The Drama Review* 51.4 (2007): 135.

ⁱⁱ Carl Weber, "German Theater: Between the Past and the Future," *Performing Arts Journal* 13.1 (1991): 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ The tenets of Brecht's socialist realism in a note from 1954 in *Ibid.*, 269.

^{iv} Johannes Becher, *Über Literatur und Kunst* (Berlin (Ost), 1962), 464.

^v Erwin Pracht, "Sozialistischer Realismus als künstlerische Methode" in *Weimarer Beiträge, Zeitschrift für Literatur, Wissenschaft, Ästhetik und Kunsttheorie* 10 (1971): 19-24.

^{vi} From Marx and Engels, *Werke*, vol 37, 42-43.

^{vii} This phenomenon is noted in many sources. A summary of Brecht's reception as it was influenced by Cold War political events is given in David Ashley Hughes, "Notes on the German Theater Crisis," *The Drama Review* 51.4 (2007) 139.

^{viii} Carl Weber, "Brecht in Eclipse?" *The Drama Review* 24.1 (1980): 115-124.

^{ix} Stefan Mahlke, Ulla Neuerburg and Ralph Denzer, "Brecht +/- Müller: German-German Brecht Images before and after 1989," *The Drama Review* 43.4 (1999): 42.

^x Marianne Mildenerberger, *Die Anwendung von Film und Projektion als Mittel szenischer Gestaltung* (Emsdetten: Verlag Lechte, 1961), 225-33.

^{xi} Volker Füller and Hans-Joachim Ruckhaberle, Eds. *Das Bild der Bühne* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 1998).

^{xii} Carl Weber, "German Theater: Between the Past and the Future," 55.

^{xiii} Susanne Ulricht, "Der ganze Faust vom Klischee befreit (Claus Peymanns Bühnenmarathon im Stuttgarter Staatstheater," *Augsburger Allgemeine* (3 Mar 1977) and Sabine Schultze, "Das Unzulängliche ('Faust I' und 'Faust II' in Stuttgart," *Rhein-Neckar Zeitung* (5-6 Mar 1977).

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- ^{xiv} Elisabeth Plessen, Ed. *Peter Zadek und seine Bühnenbildner. Wilfried Minks, Götz Loepelmann, Daniel Spoerri, Peter Pabst, Horst Sagert, Johannes Grützke, Rouben Ter-Arutunian, Karl Kneidl, André Diot* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2012) 25-6.
- ^{xv} Karl Bachler, *Gemalte Theatervorhänge in Deutschland und Österreich* (München: Bruckmann KG, 1972).
- ^{xvi} Friedrich Dieckmann, ed., *Bühnenbilder der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1971-1977* (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1978).
- ^{xvii} James K. Lyon and Hans-Peter Breuer, eds. *Brecht Unbound* (University of Delaware Press, 1995), 51.
- ^{xviii} Michael Blakemore, *Stage Blood: Five Tempestuous Years in the Early Life of National Theater* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), chapter 2.
- ^{xix} Plessen 26.
- ^{xx} Henry Popkin, "One of Europe's Most Innovative Theaters," *The New York Times* (19 Jan 1975).
- ^{xxi} Gerhard Wander, "Ein ganz neuer Peer: Peter Steins Ibsen-Inszenierung in Berlin," *Westdeutsche Allgemeine*, Ausgabe Essen (20 May 1971).
- ^{xxii} Gunther Schloz, "Peer Kingsize: Peter Steins grandiose Ibsen-Inszenierung," *Christ und Welt*, Stuttgart (21 May 1971) and Ulrich Meister, "Ein Ensemble macht Theatergeschichte: Die 'Schaubühne' in Berlin," *Schaffhauser Nachrichten* 110. Jahrgang Nr. 123 (29 May 1971): 7.
- ^{xxiii} Gabriel Heim, "Zwölf Tonnen Theater auf Reisen: En Bericht von Gabriel Heim über die Vorarbeiten zur 'Peer Gynt'-Aufführung in Zürich," *Zürcher Student* (Feb 1972).
- ^{xxiv} Benjamin Henrichs, "Shakespeares Monument, Die Schaubühne--hoffentlich kein Nachruf: Peter Stein inszeniert 'Wie es euch gefällt' in den Berliner CCC-Filmstudios," *Die Zeit*, Berlin (30 Sept 1977): 41-2.
- ^{xxv} Quoted in Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 95. Originally published as "Verfremdungseffekt in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst," in *Schriften zum Theater* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1957) but also appeared in *Life and Letters* (London, winter 1936).