Brecht, Bertolt (1898–1956)

Bertolt Brecht was arguably one of the foremost playwrights, composers, dramaturges, and political activists of the 20th century. Born in Augsburg, Bavaria, he grew up to study medicine and worked in a hospital in Munich during World War I. After the war he moved to Berlin, where he found his passion and talent for the theater. He was inspired by the influential critic Herbert Ihering, who told him how the public was hungry for modern theater. He also befriended Erich Engel, a man who directed most of Brecht's plays throughout Brecht's life. Brecht managed to put up his first two plays in Munich right after the war, Baal and Drums in the Night. But his first success came from his third play, In the Jungle of the Cities, which Engel directed in Berlin.

Brecht lived in Berlin during the 1920s, a time when the world looked to Berlin for the finest art, culture, and fashion. It was also the era of the Weimar Republic, a liberal government set up after World War I. Brecht and his work thrived during this time, taking advantage of the public's positive attitudes toward a more democratic government. By the early 1920s, Brecht had formed his infamous writing collective, which included such great German artists as Elisabeth Hauptmann, Margarete Steffin, Emil Burri, Ruth Berlau, and Helene Weigel (his second wife). The collective focused its attention on furthing Brecht's work and ambitions to use theater as a means of social change and was one of the most influential literary and theatrical movements during the Weimar Republic. The collective put on a number of Brecht's plays, works they called Lehrstücke (teaching plays), for the large worker arts organization in Germany and Austria. These works were written to transform passive audiences into active audiences whose attention was drawn to participation and social change.

Along with Brecht's original works, the collective also adapted John Gray's The Beggars Opera, renaming it Die Dreigroschenoper (The Three Penny Opera). For this work, Brecht composed his own songs and music; it became the most successful play in Berlin in the 1920s. The play focused on the hardships of the working class and the unemployed in Germany, showing the hypocritical views of the Church toward these people. The play also centered around the workers as people rather than numbers. It remains one of Brecht's most well-known plays.

The collective was also where Brecht developed a new, radical approach to the theater. Brecht believed in socialist values and the power of art to move people to better society. He wanted to design an entire method of theater where the audience experienced a sense of alienation, something he called Verfremdungseffekt (distancing effect or estrangement effect). Brecht called this new theory epic theater, the theory that a play should not simply cause the audience to emotionally identify with the scenes onstage, but rather it should invoke personal self-reflection and analysis, wherein a critical view of the stage would be developed and would move the person to enact change. Brecht wanted audiences to realize that the play was not reality but merely a representation of reality.
Brecht’s epic theater utilized a number of new techniques to heighten the audience’s sense of estrangement, such as direct addresses to the audience by actors, songs rather than long monologues, strange and unnatural stage lighting, few props, and signs with explanatory messages aimed toward the audience. Brecht was also fascinated with Asian theater, especially its use of masks. He took the literal use of masks in Asian plays and re-created them metaphorically in his epic theater, often pointing out the hypocritical attitudes of labor bosses and the Church toward the working poor. The masks of Asian theater were also the key influence for Brecht to use alienation and estrangement in his work. In fact, some scholars argue that the explanatory signs were inspired by the masks of Asian theater.

Brecht’s epic theater has become the staple way to perform his plays today. Although Brecht’s theory has been used so often and mirrored by other artists that it is now considered “theatrical canon,” some scholars and audiences feel that the effect of epic theater is lost after seeing a few similar plays that employ it. Yet, it is still considered the first form of political theater, where the audience was encouraged to understand its meaning and invoke critical thought. Brecht was also the first to use multimedia in the semiotics of the theater with the use of his trademark explanatory signs.

Throughout the 1920s to the early 1930s, Brecht and his collective flourished creatively, and he was seen as a success by German and Austrian audiences. Along with being a successful playwright, Brecht also published several books of both poetry and essays. He was also involved in early moviemaking. He wrote the screenplay to the semi-documentary film Kuhle Wampe (made in 1932), directed by Slatan Dudow. The film, dealing with the more human side of mass unemployment, was praised for its use of sarcasm, subversive humor, sharp cinematography by Günther Krampf, and musical score by Hanns Eisler. Along with his successful plays, Brecht also wrote operas and collaborated with such musical talents as Kurt Weill (who composed the musical score for the Three Penny Opera). Brecht and Weill wrote the opera Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahoganny (The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahoganny), which premiered amid Nazi protests in Leipzig in 1930. The opera ran again in Berlin in 1931 and was hailed a success.

By 1933, Brecht’s beloved home of Berlin had changed dramatically. The Nazi Party had risen to power with Adolph Hitler winning the German election in 1933. Fascism was quickly taking over the country. Brecht knew that his socialist beliefs could put him and anyone associated with him in danger. Fearing for his life, he immediately went into exile with only his wife, Helene. In exile, he consistently changed locations to evade Nazi persecution, living in Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, England, Russia, and the United States. He did not return to his home of Berlin until about 1947, after the Nazi occupation.

Though Brecht lived as an “enemy alien” of the Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945, his time in exile was spent continuing his groundbreaking work. He and his wife continued to write and stage his plays, showing his work to anyone who desired it. His most famous plays and operas were written during his exile; these included Galileo, Mother Courage and Her Children, Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti, The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui, Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Good Person of Sezuan, as well as many others. These productions were politically and socially charged works, highlighting the oppression of the Third Reich, the hardships and trials of the working poor, the hypocrisy of the Church, and the need for freethinking. In the spirit of his former collective, Brecht also adapted such Greek tragedies as Antigone, giving the classic play a new, modern life.

In April 1941, he used his influence and connections to secure a visa to the United States. Traveling
through Russia as a known enemy alien, he managed to make the boat to America and arrived in New York in July 1941. In a surprise twist, Brecht chose to live in Hollywood, California. Many believed he would stay in New York City, where his plays were sure to be welcomed. Yet, he chose to move to Hollywood and work in the budding movie industry as a scriptwriter. During the early 1940s, he worked on a few scripts but had no viable success at it. In fact, Brecht hated the movie business. He published a number of essays including On Film, in which he described movies to be the downfall of public theater. He also believed that unless film was used to challenge audiences and promote social consciousness, it had the power to destroy theater and society at large.

Remaining in Hollywood for a couple of years after the war, Brecht and his art were thrown into another political situation: the Cold War. Many countries began to test and harbor nuclear weapons, including countries with communist governments. The United States, in particular, viewed communism as a major threat to the American way of life and to the safety of the nation. The U.S. government felt communist governments like Russia would use nuclear weapons against them. U.S. officials also felt that the ideals of communism promoted the use of nuclear weapons. The country fell into a panic known as the Red Scare, the fear that anyone could fall “victim” to the “disease” of communism. To combat the communist “threat,” the U.S. established the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy. The HUAC and McCarthy were known to target people on the social fringes of society as well as the artistic elite.

In 1947, the HUAC set its sights on Brecht, harassing him about his communist allegiances. He was blacklist by the bosses of every major motion picture studio in Hollywood, never to be allowed to work for them again. In November 1947, Brecht and 30 other movie industry workers were subpoenaed to testify before the HUAC regarding communist activities and ties. At this time, Brecht had already left the United States and returned to East Berlin where he ran the Berliner Ensemble Theater, a postwar, German touring theater that primarily performed Brecht’s plays. Though he swore he would ignore the subpoena, he did testify stating that he was not, nor was he ever, a member of the Communist Party either in the United States or abroad. He and 10 others were not cited for contempt, and he returned to Europe the next day.

The last years of Brecht’s life were spent doing what he loved most: writing. He stayed relatively out of public and political controversy and wrote mostly poetry, including the well-known “Buckower Elegies.” He wrote a few more plays, but none of them were as famous as his earlier works. He lived comfortably until a sudden heart attack in the summer of 1956 took his life; he was 58 years old. He was buried in the Dorotheenfriedhof in Berlin.

Brecht’s influence is still alive today. Helene Weigel, his wife and close friend, continued to stage his works until her death in 1971, and he also left her the Berliner Theater. In his wake, Brecht left three children, Hanne Hiob, Stefan Brecht, and Barbara Brecht, all of whom went on to become well-known German actors, critics, and poets (Barbara also holds the current copyrights to all of her father’s work). Today, Brecht’s epic theater is considered a basic principle of Postmodernism. In fact, though some scholars find Brecht’s epic theater to be in the tradition of Modernism (the mood of the 1920s), other scholars argue that Brecht may have been one of the first Postmodernists, paving the way for Postmodernism by dispensing the ideas of theater in his time and creating an entirely new theater, a political theater.

His poetry has also found a large following in today’s readership. Though during his life he was best
known for his plays and operas, his essays and poems have come into recent attention and acclaim since the 1980s, highlighting similar techniques used in epic theater, such as direct address and feelings of estrangement, offering readers the opportunity to look at his poems as invitations to self-analysis and independent thought. In his lifetime, Brecht wrote and staged almost 30 plays. Even in political exile, he continued his work, emphasizing the hardships and triumphs of the working class. He valued theater, writing, art, culture, and politics that carried more than a message, but also a chance to think freely and independently. His theories, plays, and writings are still performed to sold-out audiences around the world, in dozens of languages, and he is hailed as one of the finest theatrical thinkers and writers of the 20th century.

See also
Film; Hollywood Blacklists; Literature and Activism; Performance Art, Political; Postmodernism

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