

More Plays Off the Page: Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht (1898—1956) was one of the most influential playwrights of the 20th Century—there are many who say he was the most important. He wanted nothing less than totally to revolutionize theatre. He wanted plays that “were convincing like court pleas; ... to teach the audience to reach a verdict.” He wanted the kind of entertainment that would wake up an audience, not lull it into a fantasyland of beautiful sights and sounds, and present characters with whom they could placidly identify.

To do this he devised a type of play and presentation that was supposed to “alienate” the audience, who must not empathize so much with the characters as to lose objectivity. (“*Verfremdungseffekt*,” called the V - effect or “Alienation”, the A- effect, depending which language you prefer.) It should be “cool” theatre, political: “Not man’s relation to himself, not his relation to God, but his relation to society is the main issue.”

Brecht wrote volumes on his philosophy of “Epic” theatre and how to accomplish it through writing, acting, and staging techniques. He called it “Epic”, non-Aristotelian, as opposed to “Dramatic”, Aristotelian, drama. He has written copiously, if rather opaquely on this subject. Some of his techniques call for actors breaking the 4th wall, and addressing the audience; many scenes functioning almost as one-act plays rather than as a temporally related plot; placards telling what will happen in each scene, thus dispelling all suspense; songs narrating action and interrupting scenes; bright lights in the theater as on stage; stage hands onstage shifting scenery. It is an exciting process, and one which we’ll consider.

Brecht was a Marxist, though never a Communist as he testified before HUAC, but totally anti-capitalist. Many of his plays are fervently against money, industrial greed, and for “the little guy”, and unions. He was a medical orderly in WWI, and as such witnessed the terrible carnage it wrought. No wonder he was so fiercely anti-war. *Mother Courage*, the play we will study, is perhaps one of the most passionate anti-war plays ever written. The main character, Courage, is a “tradesperson” making her living off the war. As Brecht has written her she is a fascinating character, a great plum for any actress. But how to play her???? Is she a good mother trying to keep soldiers away so that her maimed daughter may remain untouched and innocent, or is she cynical, keeping her daughter from soldiers only to lead them on so they will buy something? These are the kinds of questions we will have to consider as we go through the 30 Years War with our heroine.

I have chosen a translation which I feel is fluid and unstilted. The songs in that text I found rather unpalatable, so I have interspersed what I feel to be “friendlier” lyrics for the songs. I

will also have a disc with music from Paul Dessau's original score for which I am grateful to Rita Asch for rendering on her harpsichord. I hope this will give us some idea of how it should sound.

No one will be required to sing.

I hope we'll be able to give Brecht a run for his money.

Scripts will be available at PSRC in photocopy. Please make sure that you have them to bring to the first class: Thursday, October 5 at 10:00 a.m.

Leader: Barbara Herzberg has an extensive theatre background, has taught English and Drama, and directed plays for many years. She has been an instructor for the Evergreen Forum since its inception.

Thursdays: 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon, 8 weeks: October 5 through November 30 (no class on 11/23).

Location: PSRC