

In essence, these remarks reveal a Brecht who adapted Schiller's classical German concept of the theater "as a moral institution" to the modern world. Whereas Goethe and Schiller believed in the ennobling and humanizing function for the individual of art which would have to take precedence over, and become the prerequisite for, societal changes, the disciple of Marx wished to usurp the role of the philosopher, who, instead of merely interpreting the world, would place the theater at the disposal of his attempt to change it. Art in general and drama in particular were to aid in the process "of making the world more habitable." Since Marx, with his economic-political orientation, is the chief informant of Brecht, his theater is bound to result in a "political institution," just as Kant's metaphysical idealism sustained Schiller's belief in a moral institution. Because Brecht was not a systematic thinker, some of his contradictions and exaggerations must be charged to the special conditions and occasions which provoked them. One cannot even say that Marx primarily inspired Brecht's theories; he only confirmed and fortified some of the notions the playwright had held before. The sociologist Fritz Sternberg, under whom Brecht began his study of Marxism, put it succinctly when he said in 1927: "It was not through Marx that you came to recognize the decline of the drama. It was not through Marx that you came to speak of the epic theater. For, let us put it quite gently, Epic Theater, that is you, dear Herr Brecht."³

It follows that Brecht's theoretical writings must be taken with a grain of salt and seen as that which they were meant to be in most cases: retroactive and not always reliable comments on his presumed intentions, records of past rehearsals and performances, and instructions for potential directors of future productions. They cannot, and should not, be separated from Brecht's plays; and most misconceptions are due to the unsophisticated and patently false notion of the systematic creator of a grandiose theatrical theory who *also* happens to have written a few plays (and some of them in violation of his own rules). It is also no longer feasible to make a clear break between the youthful anarchist and the mature playwright who presumably formulated his theory under the influence of Marx. Perceptive critics such as Bentley have long ago pointed out that from the

very beginning there is a clearly traceable unity in Brecht's thinking and writing; the previously quoted remark by Sternberg only confirms it. Neither would it be correct to agree with those who argue that the older Brecht was in the process of abandoning his theory altogether, and that only death prevented him from doing so. Finally, there are the published reminiscences of an old friend of Brecht, Rudolf Frank, who claims to have advised the young author of *Eduard der Zweite*: "You know that they will chalk up against your plays the fact that you have broken the rules, until you have succeeded in bracing them with a new theory of your own. Invent a theory, dear Brecht! When Germans get a theory, they swallow everything else."⁴ While I cannot get as incensed as Frederic Ewen about the insinuation of a Brecht inventing his theory as a kind of fraud for boosting his plays, I find it unlikely that a playful remark made in 1924 should have triggered a lifelong habit of theorizing. It seems quite plausible to me that the shrewd young playwright might have been intrigued by his friend's admonition—it may have appealed to his sense of fun and penchant for mystification—but I find it sounder to assume that, on the whole, Brecht's epic theater constitutes his serious attempt to devise a theoretical basis for rescuing the art form of drama in our time.

I A Short Brecht Glossary

- Alienation*: *Entfremdung* in German, used in the Marxist sense by Brecht: man is alienated from his true self in bourgeois industrial society because he does not control the means of production.
- Catharsis*: The main effect of tragedy, according to Aristotle; by identifying with the dramatic protagonist, the spectator is purged while experiencing the emotions of fear and pity.
- Culinary*: Brecht's characterization of the traditional bourgeois theater which, at its best, has the same temporary effect as a lavish meal in a luxurious restaurant.
- Dialecticize*: A verb suggested by Brecht shortly before his death to describe his playwriting and directing efforts. To *dialecticize* means to focus on the contradictions inherent in events and characters in order to make them more lively.

Empathy: The projection of the spectator's personality into the character of the dramatic protagonist. The original German word, *Einfühlung*, suggests affection, passion—i.e., emotional involvement rather than rational conclusion.

Epic Theater: The term, used by Brecht for the first time in 1926, did not originate with him, although it is generally applied to his work today. It was already in the air when Brecht moved to Berlin in 1924 and was first used in connection with revolutionary experiments by Erwin Piscator. However, many playwrights and composers produced new plays and musical compositions in those years which have since been labeled epic (Stravinsky, Pirandello, Claudel), and others have followed in their footsteps (Wilder, Miller, Becket).

Formalism: A designation for undesirable and experimental efforts in any of the arts deviating from the narrow canon of socialist realism. Brecht's own work was frequently considered formalistic and this is the reason why he was little performed in Russia during his lifetime. In the thirties, Brecht engaged in a debate on realism with the most celebrated communist aesthetician, Georg Lukács, who, significantly, only approved of Brecht's minor nonepic plays: *Frau Carrars Gewehre*, and *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches*. It is a safe guess that Brecht's work would have been dismissed as formalistic had not his international fame presented the authorities with the embarrassing need for tolerating him.

Functional Art: In the twenties, many artists, poets, and composers tried to make art a functional part of life. The terms *Gebrauchslirik* and *Gebrauchsmusik* (for the poetry of Erich Kästner and the music of Hindemith) testify to this tendency of making art useful, which culminated in the famous Bauhaus Movement. Brecht contributed to these efforts with the didactic plays of his middle period.

Gestus: The Latin noun is difficult to translate into English. Willett defines it as "at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relation between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed."⁵ Since, as we have seen, actions determine character or, in

Brecht's words, "all feelings must be externalized," each person and each scene has its own basic social *gestus*, a kind of physical leitmotif or shorthand in terms of deportment, facial expression, rhythm, mannerisms, speech patterns, etc. The style of directing and acting, therefore, as well as the language of the playwright, must be *gestic*. The term also explains the importance of music for Brecht's theater, as music is particularly suited to bringing out the *gestic* goals of the epic theater. Thus, Kurt Weill confirms Brecht's theory as follows: "Music has one faculty which is of decisive importance for the presentation of man in the theater: it can reproduce the *gestus* which illustrates the action on stage, it can even create a kind of basic *gestus* which forces the actor into a definite attitude which precludes every doubt and every misunderstanding concerning the relevant action."⁶

Historize: Since Brecht rejects the concept of a basic human character that makes man act and react in a predictable way in keeping with unchanging timeless qualities, he aims at showing the specific circumstances responsible for a man's actions in a given situation. As Brecht states: "Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and 'universally human'; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view."⁷ The consequence for a modern theater is that playwright and actor must concentrate on the responses of stage characters relative to specific situations and periods—that is, they must *historize*.

Mimesis: Imitation or representation, especially of human speech and behavior, by the actor (Greek: *mimos*) in tragedy, according to Aristotle. Since it makes possible, and aims at, the spectator's empathy by creating illusion, it is one of the basic concepts of the Aristotelian theater which Brecht rejects.

Misuk: Motivated by a distaste for Beethoven's symphonies, which reminded him of "battle paintings," Brecht invented the term "misuk" for the music he liked and desired for his

plays. According to Hanns Eisler, *misuk* is not decadent, or formalistic, but popular to the highest possible degree; it does not shut out the mind and does not lead to a pell-mell of jumbled emotions. The best example is probably Weill's "misuk" for *Die Dreigroschenoper*.

Naïve: Toward the end of his life, Brecht praised the concept of the naïve as the most concrete aesthetic category. Naïve in his sense stands for: full-blooded, contradictory, lively, more to be felt than rationally understood. In a conversation with one of his assistants, Brecht regretfully reveals that he had not mentioned the naïve in his theoretical writings because he had taken it for granted.⁸ The remark shows (1) that it was provoked by the doctrinaire and inflexible cultural climate of Ulbricht's East Germany, and (2) that Brecht's theater was more traditional than it is usually conceded to be.

Scientific Age: Modern man is a child of the Scientific Age, which has made him, above everything else, inquisitive, skeptical, and critical. His pleasures, including his theatrical experience, must correspond to these character traits.

V Effect: The key concept in the Brechtian theater. It means the activity playwright and actor must engage in to achieve the desired effect of historization. An incident or action will only appear to me as unique, i.e., as a one-time event in history, if and when I observe it from a distance and cease to take it for granted. I must be brought to the point of finding it strange. *V* stands for the German *Verfremdung* and means "to make strange." Although the term is often translated as "alienation," one usually thinks of the latter in the sense of "alienating from" (modern man is alienated from his work), and I consider "estrangement," "making strange for a person," the better translation. Brecht used it for the first time around 1936 after he had come across the Russian equivalent (the word *ostrannenie*) in the writings of the formalistic critic Victor Shklovsky. Thus he found one of his most important concepts confirmed and defined by a known aesthete, just as Marx had once provided the theoretical underpinning for vaguely felt social notions in his younger years. Reinhold Grimm and others have

convincingly argued that the *V* effect is the one structural device that gives unity to Brecht's writing and directing.