

# BRECHT

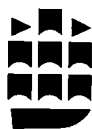
## IN PERSPECTIVE



EDITED BY GRAHAM BARTRAM + ANTHONY WAINE

# BRECHT IN PERSPECTIVE

Edited by Graham Bartram and Anthony Waine



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# INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht was a survivor many times over. He managed to establish himself as the foremost young dramatist of the Weimar Republic before the Nazi seizure of power put an end to the production of his plays; he managed in 1933 to escape into exile from almost certain persecution; a committed but independent-minded Communist, he spent the years of exile in Scandinavia and the USA rather than the USSR, and evaded the death in Stalin's labour camps that was the fate of his close friends and collaborators Carola Neher, Ernst Ottwalt and Sergei Tretyakov. After the war, equipped with Austrian passport, West German publisher and Swiss bank account, he was able to settle in East Germany, the only country that offered him the possibility of working with a theatre and a company of his own. The Berliner Ensemble, set up by Brecht and Helene Weigel in 1949, helped to assure the continuity of his legacy: not only of his writings, but also of his dramatic practice and his concept of a political theatre. Today, over a quarter of a century after his death, Brecht remains not only one of the most influential but also one of the most controversial figures of twentieth century theatre and literature.

The very vitality of Brecht's influence today, however, tends to obscure the fact that the successive upheavals that transformed Europe in the course of his lifetime have rapidly placed a great historical distance between our present, and the age into which Brecht was born and in which he grew up; and these same upheavals have continued to structure and to fragment the Brechtian legacy after his death. In a Europe split militarily, politically, socially and ideologically in two, partial and distorted images of Brecht abound. In the German Democratic Republic, his concept of a political, critical theatre has been uncomfortably accommodated on the margins of a 'positive', state-legitimated and state-legitimizing culture. In the West, his acceptance, long-delayed by the political and ideological tensions of the cold war era, has been facilitated by a separation of Brecht-the-politician from Brecht-the-writer-of-great-plays, and the upgrading of the latter at the expense of

the former. As the times in which he lived and worked become ever further removed from us, so increasingly are works such as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Galileo* and *Mother Courage* elevated to the realm of 'timeless' art, while others such as *The Mother* and *The Measures Taken*, in so far as they are known at all, are dismissed as tediously didactic idealizations of Communist Party ideology and discipline.

Distance from a subject may create the opportunity for critical reflection and the correction of such distorted images; but it may also make room for sheer ignorance. In English-speaking countries, the distance from Brecht is not only a chronological one, but also cultural and linguistic. It has been bridged (with varying degrees of success) by translation, and by performances of his plays in translation; it has also been bridged by the availability in English of a growing number of books about Brecht's life and work. What has so far been lacking, however, is a book which seeks to build the cultural-historical 'bridge'; which attempts, in other words, to situate Brecht, for the purposes of a lay as well as an academic readership, in his historical, ideological, literary and above all theatrical context. That is the task to which *Brecht in Perspective* addresses itself.

All the chapters in this book have been written specifically for it. Though varied in scope, all have the same purpose, namely to furnish material for the understanding of Brecht as a *historical* individual, reacting to the major political and social events and ideological currents of his time, and working within particular theatrical and aesthetic traditions. To do this, we felt the need to get away completely from the customary, unitary life-and-works approach, and reconstruct instead a number of perspectives within which Brecht could be viewed. Some of these perspectives are close-up, focusing on a particular aspect of Brecht's work itself; others are far more long-range, retracing a development or a tradition back to a century before Brecht's birth. A major aim of these latter is to show how aspects of German theatrical practice that in the British or American mind are often associated uniquely with Brecht (the social relevance of theatre, the break with 'traditional' dramatic forms) do in fact have a substantial history that is largely quite independent of him.

*Brecht in Perspective* is addressed to students and teachers of drama and non-academic readers, as well as to the German specialist. This has to some extent dictated our choice of 'perspectives'. The focus is primarily on Brecht's place in the German theatrical tradition, and the whole of the second part of the book is devoted to various aspects of this subject. Brecht's poetry, from the literary point of view as impressive an achievement as his plays, has not been treated here; nor has the complex question of the sources of his richly varied dramatic and lyrical diction.

The opening chapter identifies those structures in Wilhelmine and Weimar society, as well as the decisive social and political develop-

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ments between 1871 (the establishment of the Second German Empire) and 1933 (the Nazi seizure of power), which have undoubtedly influenced the behaviour and ideas of a man whose year of birth (1898) is almost equidistant from these two fateful turning-points in contemporary German history. The following chapter also presents a historical survey, concentrating, however, on the literary and philosophical traditions of German bourgeois culture whose identity began to take shape in the eighteenth century. Ladislaus Löb locates wherever possible the socially progressive and stylistically avant-gardist tendencies within German drama which anticipate the final and most radical break with traditional dramatic style wrought by Brecht in the 1920s.

By this time a large number of German intellectuals and artists believed that bourgeois culture was moribund. Brecht, like a good many of these men and women, devoted himself from now on in word and deed to shaping the identity of a nascent socialist culture. The changed function and substance of the new drama of the socialist age are examined in Chapters 3 and 4. Arrigo Subiotto's chapter proffers definitions of a number of key concepts relating to this drama, beginning with the central notion of 'epic theatre'. This chapter and the following one on the individual in Brecht's plays both consider his ideas on drama and on the concept of the individual as a response to a changing, complex and contradictory world, in which mass society, its scientific and technological achievements have necessitated a fundamental rethinking of man's relationship to the world. Both chapters also emphasize the extent to which Brecht's own views too were subject to constant reappraisal and consequently underwent significant changes in the course of his development as a writer and thinker.

The recognized necessity for change and the will to change, innovate and regenerate form the underlying theme of both Chapters 5 and 6, different though their subject matter is. Moray McGowan demonstrates how Brecht takes two deep-rooted traditions of German theatrical history, comedy and the *Volksstück*, which had until the 1920s been generally consigned to the domain of 'low' culture, and how he adapts and integrates them into his own philosophy and praxis, thereby broadening the base of the political theatre in Germany. The concluding chapter of the first part of the book focuses attention on arguably the single most important idea underlying Brecht's dramatic theory and practice, namely the political function of committed art and literature. Situating Brecht in the tradition of the literary and artistic avant-garde, Graham Bartram shows how, under the pressure of the social and political changes taking place in Imperial and Weimar Germany, this avant-garde increasingly moved from a stance of aesthetic revolt towards new concepts of the writer and intellectual as agents of social change.

The whole of the second part of the book adds a further and substantial dimension to the contextualized portrait of Brecht. Brecht not only wrote for the theatre, but also lived for it and by it. What styles of act-



ing, directing and performance were prevalent in the pre-Weimar theatre and what influences did he find in the theatre culture *and* subculture of the new republic? Who were Brecht's great contemporaries as directors, and how much is he indebted to them? What was his own contribution to the German theatre as an artistic and social institution? These are the basic questions to which the authors of the five chapters in this section address themselves.

Cecil Davies's chapter on the German theatre since the mid-nineteenth century may be seen as a sequel to Chapter 2. There Ladislaus Löb introduced the work and ideas of Germany's foremost playwrights and the movements to which they belonged. In Chapter 7 we learn about the outstanding directors such as Brahm, Reinhardt and Jessner, who from approximately 1870 dominate German theatrical history. The unique institution of the 'People's Theatre' and its endeavours to broaden the social base of the German theatre are also discussed here, and Brecht's own position *vis-à-vis* this institution is critically examined. The following two chapters (8 and 9) deal with Brecht's relationship to two directors of international standing, references to whom recur regularly throughout Brecht's writings on the theatre. In comparing Brecht and Stanislavsky, Margaret Eddershaw highlights the principal differences between these two men who for so long have been considered the antipodes of contemporary European methods of stage production – the work of the Russian symbolizing the naturalistic approach, that of his German 'adversary' the anti-illusionistic style. However, she does trace in the latter part of her chapter how the two men's positions moved closer together as they overhauled their earlier theories. As regards the German director Piscator Brecht's standpoint was always much closer to his, not least of all because both of them shared the view of the theatre as a political institution, a weapon in the class struggle – an attitude far removed from Stanislavsky's more aesthetically and psychologically oriented viewpoint for example. What Piscator perhaps taught Brecht most vividly was the technical flexibility of the modern stage and its new potential for the treatment of the great complex issues such as war, revolution, inflation and the class struggle.

Despite the revolutionary nature of Piscator's politics he operated mainly within the established (bourgeois) German theatre. The urban subculture of early twentieth-century Germany, on the other hand, had imported from France a popular medium for combining entertainment and provocative social ideas in informal surroundings: the cabaret. Hamish Ritchie, in Chapter 10, evokes the atmosphere of this big-city, anti-establishment, art form to which the young, rebellious Brecht was instinctively drawn, and concludes his chapter by indicating to what extent the ambience of this medium may have permeated Brecht's dramatic technique. Chapter 11 examines the final eight years of Brecht's life, spent in the German Democratic Republic. His attitude to the new republic, its early political developments and its cultural



## Introduction

policies, forms the first half of this chapter. The second half is concerned with the history of the Berliner Ensemble, the company he and Helene Weigel built up.

The final section of Ronald Speirs's chapter, examining the legacy of Brecht in the GDR, can be seen as part of the third and concluding section of the book, 'A Retrospective'. Chapter 12 explains how, because of the changed historical situation of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, post-war German dramatists, while acutely aware of their indebtedness to him, have nevertheless challenged many of the assumptions, ideological and dramaturgical, on which Brecht's position is based. While embracing his political theatre as a still vital model they have done so critically – surely something of which the ever-questioning father figure of this generation would have approved. Finally Maro Germanou in Chapter 13, traces the reception of Brecht in Britain, critically highlighting the misconceptions which have accompanied his importation into this country. The need to accept and present Brecht as a political writer and not merely to see him as a technical innovator is today as pressing as the need to adapt Brecht's message to the new social and political realities of late twentieth-century Britain. Some playwrights and 'alternative groups' of the 1970s have embarked on this revision.

We would like to express our gratitude to all members of the *Brecht in Perspective* 'ensemble' for the enthusiasm they have shown for the project, their tolerance of the vagaries of their editors and their cooperation in meeting deadlines. Our thanks go also to Mrs Pat Bullock for her patient and meticulous typing of the final manuscript.

THE EDITORS  
Lancaster  
January 1981

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

In referring to works by Brecht, the following abbreviations have been used throughout this volume:

*GW* *Gesammelte Werke*, 20 vols, Frankfurt am Main, 1967. The most complete edition to date of Brecht's works.

*Versuche* *Versuche*; Vols 1–7, Berlin 1930–32, republished in 2 vols, Frankfurt am Main, 1959.

Vol. 8, which failed to reach publication in 1933, is also included in the 1959 two-volume edition.

Vols 9–15, Frankfurt am Main, 1949–56.

*SzT* *Schriften zum Theater*, 7 vols, Frankfurt am Main, 1963–64.

*Aj* *Arbeitsjournal 1938–1955*, ed. with notes by Werner Hecht, 3 vols, Frankfurt am Main, 1973. Vol. 1 (pp. 1–506) covers the years 1938–42, Vol. 2 (pp. 507–1022) the years 1942–55. Vol. 3 contains the notes.

*Tb* *Tagebücher 1920–1922/Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen 1920–54*, Frankfurt am Main, 1975.

*Brecht on Theatre* *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. with notes by John Willett, London, 1964. Contains most of Brecht's major writings on the theatre apart from the *Messingkauf* dialogues, which appeared separately in 1965.

## TRANSLATION NOTE

English translations followed by 'JW' or 'JW adapted' have been respectively taken or adapted from those by John Willett. Unless otherwise annotated, all other translations are original.

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*Part One*

**THE SOCIAL, HISTORICAL AND LITERARY  
PERSPECTIVE**



# BRECHT'S GERMANY

DICK GEARY

Born in 1898, Bertolt Brecht lived through a period of European history which witnessed the most massive economic, political and social upheavals: he saw the carnage of two World Wars, the destruction of empires in the revolutions of 1917-18 in Austria, Germany, Hungary and most famously Russia, the emergence of mass Communist and Fascist movements throughout continental Europe, the triumph of the latter in Mussolini's Italy and the fear and the misery of the Third Reich, the division of Germany, and the cold war. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the traditional reserve of German intellectuals towards the dirty business of politics, a reserve reflected in Max Weber's *Politik als Beruf* (*Politics as a Vocation*) and even more so in Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (*Reflections of a Non-political Man*), broke down in the inter-war period on a scale unprecedented since the 'Vormärz' (the years preceding the March Revolution of 1848) which had produced politically committed artists like Heine and Buchner. Many intellectuals now saw the need to forge a union between the hitherto discrete realms of *Geist* (mind) and *Tat* (action).

Brecht was born into Germany's Second Reich as it rose to political and economic greatness and as it experienced a rapid and spectacular process of industrial growth. That process of industrialization and concomitant urbanization formed the backcloth to much of his writing, on occasion, even, the very substance of his dramatic themes, as in *Im Dickicht der Städte* (*In the Jungle of the Cities*) and *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (*St Joan of the Stockyards*). Some towns expanded at a quite extraordinary rate: Nuremberg, for example, which had a population of 83,200 in 1871, had become a significant city of 261,100 inhabitants only twenty-nine years later. Gelsenkirchen, home of Thyssen's mining interests, tripled in size between 1858 and 1871. Such rapid urban development was the result both of natural population growth and of a mass migration from the rural east to Germany's industrial heartland in the Ruhr; and it brought in its wake all kinds of economic and social problems. The sad story of low factory wages,

long working hours and slum housing – the last being especially marked in Germany and symbolized by the *Mietskasernen* (tenement blocks) of large industrial towns – is well known; but equally important was the alienation experienced by the urban immigrant when he came into contact with the large, impersonal and unfriendly city. Brecht himself seems to have experienced such unease when he first moved from provincial Augsburg to metropolitan Berlin; and *Im Dickicht der Städte* certainly provided a dramatic realization of this alienation. However, it should not be imagined that rapid technological change was restricted to the earlier period of the industrial revolution. The First World War and the Weimar Republic witnessed mass mobilization on an unprecedented scale, in the military, economic and political spheres, the rationalization of business structures and the introduction of serial techniques of production such as those pioneered by Henry Ford in the United States. Such developments had a profound effect upon contemporary German intellectuals: Kaiser's *Gas* (*Gas*), Toller's *Masse Mensch* (*Masses and Men*), Brecht's belief that individualism had been swept aside by collective forces and his early fascination with America, the archetypal new technocratic society.

The process of economic modernization described above was hardly peculiar to Germany in the twentieth century; but in Germany the response to this process was in many ways more exaggerated than elsewhere. The labour movement adopted an ostensibly revolutionary programme when the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) accepted theoretical Marxism at its Erfurt congress in 1891, while the *Mittelstand* of small shopkeepers, artisans and peasant farmers who felt themselves threatened by both organized capitalism and organized labour turned to various radical reactionary organizations even before the First World War – the Army and Navy Leagues, various anti-socialist and even anti-liberal bodies – and in the period after 1918 formed the rank and file of the Nazi movement. One possible explanation for this was the very speed of industrialization. Whereas Great Britain, for example, had gone through this painful process over more than a century, Germany was transformed into a modern industrial nation almost overnight. Thus adaptation to the new order was to prove extremely difficult, especially for those who retained strongly developed ideas of the status and respect due to them, and yet found that they were being rendered increasingly marginal by the competition of both labour organizations and big business. It was precisely these status anxieties which were exploited by Hitler and his cronies and which led to the successful Nazi mobilization of the Protestant lower middle class in the early 1930s.

There were a number of other factors which rendered class conflict in Imperial and Weimar Germany more bitter than in some other industrial societies. In particular, the process of economic modernization which characterized Germany's Second Reich was not matched by political modernization: that is to say, liberalization and democratization did not