After Brecht

British Epic Theater

JANELLE REINELT

Ann Arbor

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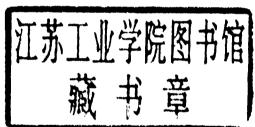
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Acknowledgments

When I first began the research for this book I approached the writers included here with considerable trepidation and insecurity. "You don't know me, but I am an American academic with socialist convictions, and I would like to talk to you about your work in connection to Brecht." Sure. They'll say no, I thought—why shouldn't they? To my surprise, not only did they agree to talk to me, but they talked passionately and with interest, even when disagreeing with my thesis, as David Hare did, or when suffering from back trouble, as Trevor Griffiths and Howard Brenton were, or from interview reticence, as Caryl Churchill was. Elizabeth and Edward Bond invited me to their house repeatedly, and Jill and Trevor Griffiths put me up. These conversations were invaluable, because their intelligence and incisiveness contributed to my formulation of the argument presented here. I am so grateful for their contributions to the project and their personal kindness to me.

This book has a marked personal voice, which intrudes from time to time on the conventional "objectivity" of such a study. But since I don't believe that scholarly work is ever without a perspective, a politics, I'm not too worried about that part: I'd rather my readers know who I am and where I stand.

There are many other people who helped with this project. My love and thanks to Ruby Cohn for guidance and support and for helping me make my first important trip to England a reality; to Ruby, Stan Garner, and Bill Worthen for incisive critiques of earlier versions of the manuscript, and to John Rouse and J. Pat Rice for reading specific chapters; to Bill Gaskill for his friendship and a generous amount of time spent talking; to Tracy Martin and Chris Woolsey, my student assistants; to David Whitton and Dean Busick for helping me obtain needed materials on the other side of the Atlantic; to LeAnn Fields, my editor at University of Michigan Press, who

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Introduction

The Brechtian legacy to contemporary British drama is twofold: it has provided playwrights and other theater workers with stimulating ideas, models of dramaturgy—even aggravating anecdotes—in relation to which they have carved out their own theatrical identities, and it also provides a theory of political theater, a framework of ideas through which critics and audience members can look at contemporary works in order to understand how they function (politically) in relation to other contemporary works and to those of their predecessors. Brecht's dramaturgy was able to do this, to become a "legacy," because the postwar situation in Britain was hospitable to, or compatible with, epic theater practices, accommodating a space for political opposition in theatrical representation that produced a hybrid British form of recognizably Brechtian theater—sometimes when the relationship to Brecht was unconscious or even hotly contested.

This book describes the various ways in which Brecht's work has proved useful for playwrights with leftist social commitments, and will also examine issues involved in attempting to forge a political theater appropriate to a particular time and place. Although many useful applications of epic theater strategies and techniques mark the work of British Leftist writers over the last thiry years, significant extensions, transformations, and even abandonments also characterize these plays and productions. While emphasizing the importance and positive contribution of Brecht, I also wish to foreground the hybridity of the theatrical styles that evolved during this period.

To begin, a series of observations on the politics of location: like many American theater critics, I have long been fascinated by what we haven't got at home—a committed and successful political theater movement. Year after year I have marveled and applauded the plays of Trevor Griffiths, Edward Bond, and the other British writers dis-

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cussed here, lamenting the dearth of similarly incisive and provocative leftist theater in the United States. What conditions in Britain made such theater possible? Subsidy helps and is an easy place to start looking for differences between national arts policies in Britain and the United States. But pointing to subsidy is a facile gesture unless accompanied by a Frankfurt school-style analysis of the almost total commodification of theatrical representation in the United States, where, moreover, live theater always sits in the shadow of TV and films. Not that Britain exists as some kind of alternative arts utopia; British theater is itself commodified for U.S. tourism. Moreover, the deadly couple of Reagan and Thatcher seriously eroded whatever government support the arts enjoyed in both countries. That the dismantling of national subsidies in Britain has been so monumental and so destructive is, ironically, an indication of its importance in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, precisely because theater was able to act as a force of cultural resistance to Thatcherism, it was recognized as a threat to be deliberately brought to heel. Money does talk and unfortunately, usually in a reactionary idiom.1

Equally important for an understanding of Britain as a site of political theater, however, is the discursive space available to the theater and other cultural forms. The British political spectrum has included parties of the Left and popular movements more openly and fully than has the United States. The Marxist vocabulary of class analysis and economism has enjoyed public parlance in Britain, while in the United States such rhetoric has always been regarded suspiciously and any form of socialism anathema. While the Democratic and the Labour parties display meaningful similarities in terms of their historical emphasis on working people and social programs, the Labour Party has called itself a socialist party, while in the United States Democrats are always ducking that disparaging epitaph. In international affairs Britain has had the continual problem of Ireland, that perennial reminder of an imperialism that will not be hidden or, it seems, ever effectively transformed.² In the United States the Vietnam War brought a radical challenge to our ideology, but it has been historically overshadowed by the many "Cold War" events, such as the Cuban missile crisis and the Iranian hostage situation. The United States Right masked issues of imperialism under superpower antagonisms, silencing the rhetoric of imperial critique in favor of the language of a democratic defense of individual freedom and free enterprise. Aesthetics has followed ideology in the United States; realism, that structural support for bourgeois individualism, has dominated theatrical representation more fully than anywhere else on the globe. No wonder Brecht never took root here.

The distinctions I have been drawing between political and aesthetic location, however, are too broad and serve to obscure the field of difference within the British context itself. Britain had maintained a relatively stable political situation which is usually referred to as the "Postwar consensus" (this is what Margaret Thatcher is reputed to have destroyed). Although Labour is a "socialist" party and certain principles of socialism such as public ownership, universal welfare, and full employment mark the postwar consensus, in fact Britain has mostly functioned as a social democracy with a mixed economy. The differences between the two parties, Labour and Conservative, have not always been perceived as very significant. In 1977 60 percent of British voters thought there was "much of a muchness" between the two parties.3 While there were certainly practical vocabularies that marked differences, the material effects of government on the lives of people were remarkably stable: "Up to 1979, Labour and Conservatives had alternated in power in equal measure. Each successive administration was therefore able to (and showed itself eager to) cancel the more original and radical legislation of its predecessors."4 This climate created the space for voices of opposition and resistance along both conservative and radical axes ("militant" Labour and "reactionary Tories"); in leftist cultural production it opened up the representation of Britain as not-nearly-socialist-enough.

The rhetorical tools for this critique were already available within the discursive patterns of the public sphere. Stuart Hall has written extensively about Margaret Thatcher's strategies for overturning the postwar consensus by manipulating the terms of discourse available to various constituencies: "[Thatcherism] has changed the currency of political thought and argument. Where previously social need had begun to establish its own imperatives against the laws of market forces, now questions of 'value for money,' the private right to dispose of one's own wealth, the equation between freedom and the free market, have become the terms of trade, not just of political debate in parliament, the press and the journals, and policy circles, but in the thought and language of everyday calculation." Oppositional cultural practices that developed during a period of relatively

moderate and stable governments (during the 1960s and 1970s) were actively engaged in and finally severely disabled by the 1980s battle with Thatcherism. In the 1990s, the challenge will be to examine and transform oppositional discourse in light of the historic changes in the East and the devastating years of conservative hegemony at home. In the various chapters, and directly in the last chapter, I will suggest how this transformation is beginning to take place in theatrical representation. The end of the Cold War, the devastation and long-term effects of Margaret Thatcher's domestic policies, and the emergence of diverse new perspectives in the wake of postcolonial and multicultural critiques have destabilized the English epic tradition. Indeed, these seismic changes are indicative of the major reasons why the "fittingness" of Brechtian dramaturgy for the British situation has changed or slipped. It has, to borrow from Brecht, "been overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view."6

It is perhaps easy to see why Britain has provided hospitable ground for the development of Brechtian dramaturgy when compared to the United States. A comparative look at postwar Brecht reception in Germany provides another kind of gloss on Britain. I would not argue that Brecht provides a greater legacy to Britain, but I do think the nature of the fit has been less problematic than in Brecht's own homeland. Brecht's most immediate heirs are often thought to be German—Heiner Müller is the most obvious example—in fact, however, various differing resistances in both former East and West Germany created a climate in which Brecht was almost begrudgingly accepted rather than embraced. The reception of Brecht within his own country is much too complex to be accurately accounted for here; one can say, however, that, while West Germans were engaged in a process of trying to overcome their Nazi past with an emphasis on universal and humanistic values, East Germans found Brecht overly formalistic in an era of Soviet realism.7 In the 1960s, when a new generation of young directors in West Germany recognized and canonized Brecht, "Brecht-fatigue" set in; he became old hat almost immediately. The plays became museum pieces or culinary entertainments; the real legacy moved to the directing styles of the next generation (e.g., Peter Stein and Peter Zadek).

Meanwhile, East Germany turned Brecht into an official classic

and used him as an establishment example against the experimental work of new, young theater workers. As Klaus Volker wrote in 1987, "While Brecht has been reduced to pure entertainment in the West, his theatre has become a party organ in the East."8 Actually, East Germany was not an appropriate place to develop theater that was primarily anticapitalist in form and content. East German playwrights, to be resistive, to be progressive, needed to shift their work toward a critique of a failing socialism. The role of the individual, the psychic construction of the subject under really existing socialism (as distinct from theoretical, or textbook, socialism), became a pressing concern in ways that were truly incompatible with a Brechtian dramaturgy, which structurally resisted representation of the interior of selves. Of course, Heiner Müller's early work shows the imprint of Brecht's theater—Cement most clearly; Hamletmachine, Medea Fragments, and Quartet, however, responded to Müller's concrete historical situation in ways that were only Brechtian in a loose sense. Brecht's plays and much of his theoretical writings require capitalist conditions of production and social organization in order to do their work of unmasking ideology. The former West Germany and the United States domesticated or simply foreclosed Brecht; the British were able to use him more productively.9

I disagree with Sue-Ellen Case, who has written recently that the "international trade" in Brechtian strategies has led to an abstraction of Brecht's techniques from their historical and material conditions, "importing strategies specific to the German context into the British one." While she writes specifically about feminist uses of Brecht, the general point is that a local and historical meaning should not be promiscuously applied to other countries and contexts. On the contrary, the Brechtian strategy of historicizing both Brecht and the British theater leads to clarification by juxtaposition. What has happened in Britain is specific and local to its own material conditions, but it is illuminated through reference to the Brechtian legacy. Brecht's oeuvre, too, sometimes appears differently in light of the unique inflections and modifications of a different time and place. 11

Brecht and Britain

When trying to fix a date to the beginning of the Brecht-and-Britain connection, a number of important occurences converge involving

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the general political climate, the emergence of indigenous theatrical work made possible by that climate, and direct exposure to Brecht. Between 1945 and 1960 Britain was building its postwar consensus, which involved full employment; strong central government; health, education, and welfare reforms; and strong trade unions. ¹² Conservatives and Labour struck a bargain in which the Right agreed to live with social programs and Keynesian economic policies, while the Left accepted modified capitalism and identification with the strategic interests of the Western bloc against Soviet interests. This consensus established the discursive field within which cultural production would operate. The Arts Council was established in 1946, and its subsidy grew rapidly through this period. ¹³

By 1956 this sociopolitical climate empowered a generation of working- and middle-class playwrights, the so-called kitchen sink writers (many of whom were educated as a result of the Education Act of 1944). Look Back in Anger, surely established as the debut of this new movement, serves as a marker for playwrights, subject matter, and venue. (It was produced at the Royal Court, where so many new writers would work.) Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in working-class East End London produced new work as well as revisionist classics, and Littlewood herself produced Brecht's Mother Courage in that same landmark year (1956).

Within a few years the large state-subsidized theaters, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), were in the process of being established. 14 The RSC (1961), under Peter Hall, collected Peter Brook and Michel St. Denis, while the National Theatre began when Lawrence Olivier was appointed first artistic director in 1962. He asked William Gaskill and John Dexter to be associate directors and Kenneth Tynan, who early-on promoted Brecht in his journalism, to be literary manager. In fact, in each of the four major theaters of this period key leadership figures came to champion and emulate Brechtian theater. In A Sense of Direction William Gaskill recalls George Devine's excitement, after visiting Berlin, about Brecht's design techniques (Devine was the artistic director of the Royal Court and Jocelyn Herbert the key designer). Gaskill also chronicles the visit to Berlin of the newly appointed artistic staff of the National (the Oliviers, Dexter, Tynan, Gaskill): "We were unanimous in our admiration for the work, perhaps for different reasons. We believed that it set a standard to be emulated, but we never theorized as to how

this was to be achieved."¹⁵ When combined with the Brechtian eye for staging, which Peter Brook incorporated into his work at the RSC, and Joan Littlewood's Brechtian experiments based on indigenous political and working-class aesthetics, it should be clear that the British appropriation of epic style and techniques constituted a strong element in theatrical productions of the period and in the years to come.

The Berliner Ensemble performed in London for the first time—also in 1956—at the Palace Theatre, presenting Mother Courage, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, and Drums and Trumpets. The production and playing styles, the conceptual apparatus as embedded in the mise-enscène, and the role of music in the productions were apparent even to those in the audiences who knew no German and so couldn't follow the text. As Martin Esslin has pointed out, the Berliner Ensemble became a living example of what subsidized theater could be and do and silenced critics who insisted that state-subsidized theaters became artistically sterile: "So Brecht became the focal point, the rallying cry of the younger generation of theatrical artists who had realized that the future of the theater as a serious vehicle for ideas, enlightenment, and beauty depended on the recognition that the commercial system was no longer able to provide the basis for viable drama."¹⁶

Martin Esslin, however, writing in 1969, did not really believe that a Brechtian influence mattered much in Britain. Emphasizing the lack of texts available in English, and the lack of understanding of Brecht's work, Esslin felt the British basically missed Brecht, since for Esslin Brecht's greatest attribute was his "mastery of the German language, his stature as a major poet."17 In fact, this early article is rather curious for, while Esslin sweepingly dismisses the post-1956 era as possessing "few valid productions of Brecht, little genuine knowledge about Brecht, and hence little evidence of any influence of Brecht's actual work and thought,"18 it goes on to document an astonishing amount of important work appearing in those years. William Gaskill, for example, directed productions of Mother Courage, Baal, The Recruiting Officer, and The Caucasian Chalk Circle. The Ensemble came back for a second visit in 1965 with Aurturo Ui, Coriolanus, The Threepenny Opera, The Days of the Commune, and excerpts from Mahagonny. Within a decade most of the important Brecht plays had been produced at major venues, and two exemplary visits of the

Ensemble demonstrated epic style and working methods.¹⁹ In fact, Esslin himself writes, "As far as design is concerned, practically *all* British stage design, outside the area of the most old-fashioned drawing-room comedy, today derives from the work of the main Brechtian designers, Neher, Otto, and von Appen."²⁰ And in 1964 John Willett's tremendously important translation of Brecht's theoretical writings became widely available. As will be clear from the following chapters, many of the playwrights under discussion here report seeing little Brechtian work, but almost all had read and thought about and talked about John Willett's *Brecht on Theatre*. There are many ways to leave a legacy.

Three Brechtian dramaturgical concepts recur with persistent frequency in the work of the socialist playwrights discussed here; in fact, they constitute the "essential Brecht." These three practices—gestus, epic structure, and historicization—transform the nature, rhetoric, and ideology of theater. The Alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt, or A-effect) is produced by the combination of these three. Treating it separately can lead to a formalist understanding of Brecht, for the distancing of the A-effect may not always be sociopolitical, while the effect produced by the interaction of gest, epic techniques, and historicization is, fundamentally, sociopolitical. Alienation implies the necessity of economic, material, and ideological recognition. It is more accurate to say that all four of these features must occur together to insure the desired political reading.²¹

A hungry beggar eats soup differently from a wealthy king. An individual actor develops the proper gestus for eating, which reveals her/his character's relation to the social and political power structure. Brecht gives the audience a lesson in gestus in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* when Azdak gives the Grand Duke a lesson on how to eat his cheese like a poor man. Gestus can also apply to a scene, and the director can stage it to produce awareness of a socially typical action. Mother Courage bargains for silver and loses her son in the same gesture. The model book as well as the text gives the central gestus of the scene, in which the sale of the belt buckle carries the price tag of Eilif's freedom. Brecht wrote about the nature of the gestus that "not all gests are social gests. The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gest, though the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one, for instance if it comes to represent a badly dressed man's continual battle against watchdogs. . . . the social gest is the gest rele-

vant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances."²² This is, then, both a concern about content and about form: while the content of a social gest may transform itself over time, be different in varying moments of history, the goal of presenting the social relationship economically and clearly onstage remains. Experimentation and constant revision will enable the particularly appropriate gestus to emerge.²³

Brecht himself defined his theater as epic then overthrew this nomenclature for the appellation "dialectical theater." Nevertheless, we know the Brechtian theater as an epic theater, and many British theater workers also think about their own tradition as epic (sometimes including Shakespeare, whose work is often said to be epic and whose interest and importance for Brecht is obvious). The well-known Brecht essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" contains a famous chart contrasting "dramatic" and "epic" theater. Still, it leaves a lot to be desired as an adequate explanation of the differences, since it is structured on bipolar high contrasts that do not literally hold (e.g., the opposition between plot and narrative breaks down in most of Brecht's own plays, which do possess fairly elaborate plot structures). I prefer Brecht's description of the craft of epic writing in "A Short Organum":

As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment.²⁴

This is the critical Brechtian description of dramaturgical structure, containing the rationale and the specifications for most of the British work I would call epic. It also distinguishes this structuring from "dramatic," or realist, structure, which is usually seamless rather than knotted, invisible rather than visible. Even Shakespeare's episodes do not always show these "knots." They are an image both of the workmanship, the constructedness, of the play and also of the knots-to-be-undone—i.e., of social and historical contradictions and sticking points to be examined and clarified in the text or production.

In a sense all epic plays are history plays; it's just that some deal with the contemporary historical moment and others with the past. To "historicize the incidents of the narrative" as Brecht would have playwrights do is probably the single most important aspect of epic writing, because it involves situating the events within a context that both explains them and yet is not necessary (i.e., it could have been otherwise). Leftist theater-indeed, all politically committed theater—must represent the possibility for change. In order to do so it must represent the particularities of the situation in time and space, the power dynamics operating in and on this situation, and the ideological formations that govern the field of discourse. Feminism and the other postmodern critical theories have made the same critique about the fiction of the "natural," or "essential," characteristics of humans, which are really effects of the Law under which human beings live. Only through representing the fiction-in-process, in other words, alienating the natural, can interested parties hope to open a space for actual change. Brecht describes this historicization in many places in his writings, shifting tone or emphasis in his customary polemical way to suit the occasion. Here are two of the most important passages, the first from "A Short Organum," the second from "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting":

We must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too.²⁵

The bourgeois theatre emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged "eternally human." Its story is arranged in such a way as to create "universal" situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every colour.... This notion may allow that such a thing as history exists, but it is none the less unhistorical. ²⁶

This necessity for historicization is applicable to both content and form. The story told must show, through social gests, the sociopolitical formation underlying the interactions, while the method of telling must present a discontinuity and an opportunity for judgment. Thus, this proviso: Alienation effect occurs in those moments, but only in those moments, when the social gestus of a scene produces a clear historical perspective within an alterable field of possible actions. This way of stating it avoids those synonyms for alienation such as distanciation or making strange that apply to formalist art as well as epic art.

Two other aspects of Brecht's theater, distinct from dramaturgy per se, pertain to this discussion. The development of a specifically Brechtian acting style and the expectation of a certain kind of spectatorship inform the entire epic project and its British variants. For Brecht a triangular relationship exists between the actor, the character, and the spectator. It is as if the actor is talking to the spectator about a third person: "Look here," she might say to the spectator, "did you notice how the Grand Duke can't quite pull off his disguise? Know why that is? He doesn't know how to eat like a poor man. Here, I'll show you." Thus, the actor demonstrates behavior to the spectator and engages in examination and representation in a conscious, indeed self-conscious, way. Finding just the right social gestus, just the right prop to help carry the gestus, these are crucial actorly duties. Brecht cautions actors to study their first reactions and follow what astounds or surprises, not to turn their choices into "universal" ones: "The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them. He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation."27 This is sometimes a hard concept to explain to student actors, especially in the United States, but British acting traditions have always been strong on cool observation and the technique of playing social difference, whether in Oscar Wilde or Bertolt Brecht. There is a certain compatibility (noted wittily by Howard Brenton in chapter 1) between traditional English acting and Brechtian requirements that

has facilitated the success of the epic style in Britain. Of course, Brecht always cautions about the overly familiar: if recognized too quickly as natural, a behavior is not examined or probed. Thus, Edward Bond's great frustration with the polished and predictable acting of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The playwrights in this book often help actors along by building various devices and clues into the structure and dialogue of their plays, thereby producing this triangulated relationship.

This summary of Brecht's main elements is necessarily cursory. Those not familiar with Brecht are referred to the large number of excellent reference works on Brecht and his theater, most especially to the work of John Willett, who, in addition to being Brecht's definitive translator in English and an astute critic and historian, happens to be British.²⁸

Although this is primarily a book about playwrights and their work, it is impossible to study Brecht without realizing the central importance of the role of design and direction in mounting a counteraesthetic of any kind. This book focuses on texts, while a book on Brecht's legacy to France might more appropriately focus on miseen-scène. Nevertheless, many of the playwrights discussed here have worked closely with key directors or have directed extensively themselves, and Brecht's legacy to the British theater includes applications of epic principles to staging and design. There are a number of designers who have contributed to the British epic style (Jocelyn Herbert, Andy Phillips, and Hadyn Griffin come immediately to mind).²⁹

Among directors, William Gaskill's career is both exemplary and formative: Gaskill is the British director who most exemplifies the Brechtian legacy and whose work has in many ways been responsible for translating that legacy into British staging practices. Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook, and John Dexter have also made directorial contributions of import, but it is William Gaskill whose directing continues, into the 1990s, to include and foreground the Brechtian connection in Britain and to dramatize the force and sequence of that legacy, even as he turns to other nonepic work (in the 1990s, e.g., Pirandello and Bulgakov).

First, of course, there is Gaskill's involvement with the Royal Court. He was one of the original assistants to the artistic director chosen by George Devine (the other was John Dexter), and eventually he succeeded Devine as artistic director (1965–72). The enthusiasm of Devine for the work of the Berliner Ensemble was shared by Gaskill, who was intrigued before he saw them and then completely won over by their 1956 visit to London. The proscenium stage at the Royal Court was fitted for the first season with a permanent setting modeled on the surround of the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. The theater was conceived and, due to its size and shape, served as an epic playing space. Plays that weren't epic were "made to fit," as, e.g., Look Back in Anger or Angus Wilson's The Mulberry Bush. Gaskill admits, "Many of the plays [produced at the Court] were not epic, although we often tried to reimpose that style." Joceyln Herbert, the resident designer, was developing an austere, epic style, which Gaskill thinks corresponds to "a certain kind of English Puritan aesthetic" in its lack of decoration.

Although Gaskill also experimented with Stanislavsky, and improvisation and mask work, he pioneered experiments with Brechtian acting in the Writers' Group, which he ran at the Court during his early years as assistant artistic director (1958-60). This work has shaped his long-term approach to acting and to staging texts. The group included Edward Bond, Ann Jellicoe, Keith Johnstone, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, and Wole Soyinka, most of whom have been characterized by various critics as Brechtian.34 There he conducted improvisations based on Brecht's Der Jasager and Der Neinsager, using only statement and question as method. During this workshop he also used classic Brecht third-person narrative techniques to establish actor objectivity. His account of rehearsal techniques for The Caucasian Chalk Circle, which he directed for the RSC in 1962, includes, in addition to third-person playing, analyses of the social as opposed to psychological motivation of actions. He also had the actors play different parts, differing the final casting decisions until it was clear "who play[ed] what part best." Thus, Gaskill made a wide application of Brecht's principles through the various strands of his own preparation and technique.35

From this early work he learned the necessity of understanding a play in terms of the sociopolitical meaning of its actions. He began to see a play as "a series of actions governed by decision," and he saw that character is secondary to the action: "Theatre is about what happens, not what people are." He also saw, perhaps as a result of the

Caucasian Chalk Circle casting situation, that working with a company that understands and shares a basic attitude to the project enables the process. He considers his work on Fanshen for Joint Stock in 1975 to be the epitome of this approach: "For me, it was a fulfilment of the process started on The Chalk Circle and thwarted by the demands of the RSC and Peter Hall [Hall took over rehearsals during the last two days], the process in which the actors share an understanding of the political responsibility of the play; they are not just there to serve the writer but, together with the writer, are making a statement." 37

While a permanent company that shares a point of view has proved to be a fleeting chimera over the years, Gaskill has satisfied some of his desire for this kind of work by teaching, which he has done off and on throughout his career. He has been Grenada Director in Residence at University of California, Davis, on repeated occasions, and I have had the opportunity to see three of his productions with Davis students: In the Jungle of Cities (1983), Saint Joan of the Stockyards (1989), and Howard Barker's The Love of a Good Man (1990). Describing his rehearsal process for the Barker play, Gaskill noted: "We talked about the meaning of the text a lot . . . did close textual work. I wouldn't let them do Act Three for weeks and weeks; they just didn't understand it. I think that was right."38 On the other hand, when he directed Saint Joan he did not talk with the students at length about the politics of the text but, instead, concentrated on the challenges of speaking the text with clarity and precision, because he felt that the political meanings of the text would not work for students today, since they have "no historical sense" and since "the problems of class struggle as stated in the 30s aren't the same as they are today, or at least even if they are, they're not imaginatively and theatrically true."39

Although his approaches to teaching differed in the two productions, what was unmistakable in performance was the emphasis on the action of the discrete scenes, the decisions made, the objective presentationality of the actors, and the austere and uncluttered aesthetics of the staging, which clarified the gestus in each scene. When I asked him in 1985 what major things he had learned from Brecht as a director, he stressed that movement was only to be employed to indicate a fundamental change in the relationships: "You should not move an actor in a scene without a reason." Writing in A Sense of Direction in 1988, he reaffirms the necessity of "keeping a sense of

what the play is about.... It was a lesson that I started to learn in 1956. The most usual approving comment on my work is that 'it's so clear'. What do they expect it to be. Muddy?"⁴¹

All of the Gaskill productions that I have seen manifest this quality, unlike the work of many American directors, who seem to move people about in order to keep the audience's attention. But rather than appearing static, Gaskill's productions appear very dynamic, because when movement happens it always means something important and decisive. In his production of Saint Joan his groupings were always clear and distinct, allowing the perception of three groups—the poor, the Salvation Army people, and the capitalists. The dialectics of the text were played out through the compositions and blocking of the scenes. Similarly, The Love of a Good Man featured striking differences between the working-class soldiers and the middle-class characters, underlined by compositional choices. For example, at one point the middle-class mother kisses the dead son: Howard Barker says this should be center stage. Gaskill rehearsed it there, then he realized it needed to be staged to one side, allowing the soldiers who enter carrying the coffin to form a group in visual opposition on the other side. Gaskill laughs: "I can do that in my sleep. . . . I've done it in so many plays, I almost do it without thinking about it."42 Be that as it may, the politics of composition are a key to his work, gleaned from Brecht and visible throughout his career, from his production of Edward Bond's Saved in 1965 to the present.

Gaskill directed many of the early Brecht productions in Britain, including *Mother Courage* (National Theatre, 1965), *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (RSC, 1962), and *Baal* (West End, 1963). Through the years he has directed most of the major and some of the minor Brecht plays. He chose *Saint Joan* for University of California, Davis (UCD), in part, in order to do a Brecht play that he doubted could be done in a commercial site and because he had always liked the play and had not done it.⁴³ He was widely known as the major director of the plays of Edward Bond, through *The Fool*. He has also collaborated with David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark, doing several productions for Joint Stock, the other producing group (besides the Court) for which many of the writers discussed here worked.⁴⁴ Gaskill has helped develop the meaning of "epic theater" for Britain and serves as an important focal point for the Brechtian legacy.

In recent years Gaskill sees himself as "not a very political per-

son,"45 which seems strange for someone who was a member of the Committee of 100 of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and participated in the first Adlermaston march. I suspect, in part, his current self-perception is a symptom of the legacy of the 1980s to isolated and privatized artists, working on single projects, living in the divisive climate that Thatcherism had so pervasively enforced. And as Gaskill has never been an advocate of party or program, it is easy to experience the erasure of any meaningful political energy in the vacuum in which grass roots activism or working with likeminded theater peers used to be.

Finally, then, a word about the particular playwrights collected here: Howard Brenton, David Hare, Edward Bond, Trevor Griffiths, Caryl Churchill, and John McGrath. While they are far from the only playwrights who offer useful examples of the Brechtian legacy, they have made an important and influential body of work, defining the practical political theater from 1960 to 1990; one could say they are hegemonic in this special sense. These six well-known contemporary writers offer different ways of appropriating and transforming or sometimes countering Brecht. I have deliberately included someone like Trevor Griffiths, who considers himself a realist writer rather than an epic writer, because he provokes the issue of the limitations of the epic-realist opposition, creating a richly hybrid body of work that does and does not deserve to be called "epic." Furthermore, his own perception of the role of the leftist writer within British culture enhances every aspect of this discussion. I have not written about the first generation of post-Brechtian writers (John Osborne, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, and Shelagh Delaney), except for Edward Bond. In a way he "holds a place" for a group of writers who started out in London at the Royal Court or Stratford East. Unlike the others, Bond continues to be essential to any discussion of the contemporary epic and its relation to Brecht. What is offered here, then, is a selection of writers who might be fruitfully considered "After Brecht"; readers will probably want to add their own selections to the list.

Chapter 1

Howard Brenton: Gestus in Public Spaces

More than anyone writing in Britain today Howard Brenton epitomizes the Brechtian legacy. His singular and original contribution to left-wing theater is exemplary in its own right, and Brenton seems to show what a successor to Brecht might be like. In this judgment I am specifically thinking of how much more suitable Brenton is for this post than Heiner Müller, knowing full well the overwhelming critical judgment that sees Müller as Brecht's "son." While Müller certainly employed, especially in his early work, a full range of Brechtian theory and technique with which he was completely knowledgable, his theater practice has moved away from Brechtian dramaturgy. Rather than seeing this change, as many have, as the result of his seduction and co-optation by the West, it seems clear to me that Müller was confronting a really-existing situation that rendered the Brechtian outlook obsolete. I refer, of course, to "reallyexisting socialism" and the fact that the imperative responsibility for Müller became a dramatic critique of his experience in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). For Brenton in Britain the fight remains framed in similar ideological terms as Brecht's battle with Weimar. In Britain a ruling class of privileged bourgeoisie has continued to enforce radical individualism and capitalist socioeconomism as the dominant hegemony. The contradictions between material reality and ideological flummery are still capable of exposure and critique; Brenton's sense of emptiness is less existentially vivid in a country that has not had a communism to feel betrayed by. Only recently, of course, the post-Cold War situation has begun to change the climate for leftist writers, bringing with it the need for a reappraisal of many relationships, including the legacy of Brecht.

Brenton grew up in a time when revolution seemed like a viable possibility, much as was the case in Brecht's society before his exile.

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After two periods of Thatcherism, however, Brenton along with other theater workers might be said to find themselves increasingly in a kind of exile, and indeed exile has been an important theme in Brenton's work: Weapons of Happiness (1976), Bloody Poetry (1984), Conversations in Exile (1985), The Genius (1983).

There are other reasons why Brenton seems to me to epitomize the Brechtian legacy: temperamentally, he is feisty, with a driving insistence about his goals; he combines irony, satire, and broad humor in scathing critiques of those in power, and, like Brecht, he is always situated politically vis-à-vis current affairs. Ruby Cohn finds that "of the left-wing playwrights born in the 1940s Howard Brenton has been most vituperative against mainstream culture."2 As for aesthetics, he has a demonstrated track record of experiment; his restless "ripping off," as he would say, of various forms and the wide range of the types of plays he has written combine with his openness and commitment to collaboration.3 Many of his experiments have been collaborative, including Brassneck (1973), Epsom Downs (1977), The Sleeping Policeman (1983), and Moscow Gold (1990). He sometimes writes at breakneck speed but also might take years to finish a project-Greenland (1988) represents seven years of work-and he is a reviser of materials as conditions change. Much as Brecht revised Galileo in light of history, Brenton's Churchill Play has three scripts, reflecting the different moments of its production and key revivals. While Brenton does not have Brecht's penchant to theorize, and sometimes claims he has no use for aesthetics, he is a hard-edged intellectual, who is willing to engage in ideas about the theater and how it works, to research and work with the knowledge of others, and to write several very fine pieces of theory and a fair amount of criticism.4

Of course, Brenton is not a simple successor to Brecht. He lives, after all, in a different time—closer to Müller in that respect. The preoccupations of late-twentieth-century Western "democractic" life mark his work. He has shown awareness and interest in the question of ethnic and cultural differences and their representation (*The Sleeping Policeman* and *Iranian Nights* [1989]); taken up the task of interrogating really-existing socialism from within a leftist perspective (*Weapons of Happiness* and *Thirteenth Night* [1981]); lived through feminism and grappled with gender issues (*Sore Throats* [1979] and *Bloody*

Poetry). These topics are embraced in a passionate belief that cultural struggle does matter, that writing is valuable to the body politic. One major difference, perhaps, between this moment in history and Brecht's is reflected in Brecht's absolute sense that he was at the center, that as a man and an intellectual and a German, he was centered. Brenton is decentered; it is the contemporary condition.

And then there is Brenton's own attitude toward Brecht. He has, in a most direct way, engaged Brecht. In his early years he dismissed and attacked him, then, having translated two of his plays, he rethought his position on Brecht, and was (and is) able to talk about Brecht in detail—the plays and the theory—and about what he learned and what he has eschewed. He has published on these matters, and he has been willing to discuss them at length.⁵ Brecht is seriously "on line" for Howard Brenton, even as he transcends him with his own creativity and contemporaneity.

Brenton has certainly not wanted to imitate Brecht's plays, but he has been committed to an epic play structure for most of his career. In 1975 he explained, "You could say that there are two kinds of plays-those set in rooms and those outside rooms...outside means using an epic structure."6 The advantage to an outdoor setting is that the play is kept "public," a term that for Brenton is more precise than political. "The space between people defines the actual physical theatre, the space between the audience itself and the actors. And that space and relationship becomes an almost moral force in the writing and in the presentation—a sense of bodies and will and concentration, and laughter or abuse. From that feeling, you begin to want to write about how people conduct themselves in life as groups, as classes, as interests."7 The theater, then, is inherently public and political. In most of Brenton's plays a group of people find themselves in a public situation. Brenton's play The Genius takes place on a university knoll. The Romans in Britain (1980) is played on the contested soil of its multiple locations. The Churchill Play (1974) ranges over a variety of public locations and depicts a group of political prisoners in a detention camp as they perform an "entertainment" and ultimately attempt to escape from their British government captors. In Hitler Dances (1982), a group of children play on a rubbish heap that is also a graveyard from World War II. An old German soldier rises from the dead and tries to return home. He tells Linda,

(Linda), the "enemy" of World War II (Hans), and the allied situation

Howard Brenton

(Violette).

This publicness, which is essentially the confrontation of different classes and social groups over the issues of the narrative, is even present in Brenton's "indoor" plays. Magnificence (1973) has an outside second act, but the opening inside scene is also public. A group of young would-be revolutionaries takes over an unoccupied house. In it they find an old man who has come inside to drink and sleep. In point of fact, the group is not there completely by themselves and the space is a neutral, public space until they try to take it over and spray their own slogans on the walls. Even Sore Throats, which takes place completely indoors and is Brenton's most domestic play, uses the public space of an empty apartment-for-rent to create a sense of social context. The woman who becomes the third protagonist is a stranger, coming by to examine the apartment, when she stumbles on the marital squalor of Jack and Judy. In Brenton's recent play, Berlin Bertie (1992), the apartment location is made considerably less private by its disheveled condition and the presence of Joanne, who is a stranger staying there. The space is like squatters' digs.

Thus, the encounter of people from different perspectives and value systems shapes Brenton's plays. The space provides a dimension of the social situation; indeed, space materializes and concretizes it as theater practice. As Brecht noted: "To make these transactions intelligible the environment in which people lived had to be brought to bear in a big and significant way. This environment had of course been shown in the existing drama, but only as seen from the central figure's point of view, and not as an independent element." While Brecht used projected titles and images to create a specific attitude to the environment, Brenton experiments with the power of public space to evoke the social context. This task is tricky, since what is wanted is not a Zolaesque environment of overdetermined objects and scenery but, rather, a space that activates and makes evident the social praxis that takes place there. The audience itself is part of the public, evaluating and making judgments about the various scenes



The Churchill Play, by Howard Brenton. Barbican Theatre, November 1988. Director Barry Kyle. Photograph by Donald Cooper, courtesy of Howard Brenton.

from public life in which they do or could participate. W. B. Worthen has written about Brenton's techniques for compelling the audience to "interrogate the reenactment, consumption, and transmission of 'history' as theater." Worthen points up the self-conscious role playing of Hitler Dances and the play-within-a-play structure of The Churchill Play as metatheatrical critiques that implicate spectators, "address[ing] not so much the acting of political theater but its function in a specific social context, one that embraces the performers, the onstage audience, and the theatrical audience they come to represent."10

Juxtaposing two narratives is another of Brenton's recurring epic techniques that builds on the plasticity of his spatial conceptions. Reminiscent of Caucasian Chalk Circle, in which Brecht abruptly interrupts the Grusha story and counterposes the Adzak story, Brenton's plays often feature discontinuous episodes linked not by necessity but by design. Hitler Dances uses two interspliced narratives to this advantage, as does The Churchill Play, with its clear division between the play-within-a-play, which the prisoners rehearse and perform. and the incidents having to do with their prison life and escape attempt (though these are finally connected, again similar to Caucasian Chalk Circle). Romans in Britain is built on the intersection of two cultures, Celt and Roman, and their juxtaposition with 1980s Ireland. Brenton's recent play, Berlin Bertie, intercuts a contemporary British social worker's life under Thatcher with an East German church worker's life under Honecker. This work echoes his earlier Weapons of Happiness, in which a strike in a chip factory in contemporary England is undercut by Josef Frank's experience as a cabinet minister in the Communist Czech government during the Stalinist 1950s. In each of these plays there is a thematic point to the interspliced narratives, but there is also a structural payoff in terms of alienation and historicization. About Magnificence, which also features a split narrative, Brenton said, sounding very much like Brecht: "Coherence within a play is not a matter of choosing to write in one style. That's just sameness, superficial neatness. Actual coherence means using many different styles, moulding them, a deliberate process of selection, in order to express that whole within a play."11

Contradiction and coherence are inherent in any theater committed to a dialectical process; "character" is one place in which they're found. Brecht and Brenton both encounter them when divising techniques of characterization.

This is Brecht: "It is too great a simplification if we make the actions fit the character and the character fit the actions: the inconsistencies which are to be found in the actions and characters of real people cannot be shown like this. . . . The coherence of the character is in fact shown by the way in which its individual qualities contradict one another."12

Howard Brenton

This is Brenton: "I've always been against psychology in plays. I think that psychology is used like a wet blanket by many playwrights, and as a very easy explanation and I wanted to stop that dead in its tracks.... One of the formal ways of doing that was to emphasize the role, the action. If you fit the two conficting elements of the action into the same actor, there is no danger, or it lessens the danger, of an actor working out a psychological performance."13

Although he wrote that in 1975, Brenton is still working from the same convictions, as is evident in his discussion of the appropriate style for Moscow Gold. Although Bloody Poetry, H.I.D. (1989), and Berlin Bertie can be seen as more psychological than most of his other work, the gaps in explanatory material, the contradictions of the characters, and their often ambiguous status continue to alienate any personalized interpretation. His plays are always more about situation than about character, although he has extended the capacity of epic form to include aspects of intense emotion and personal experience without losing control of the contradictions. 14

In some plays Brenton depsychologizes his characters by using theatrical devices. In Christie in Love (1969), for example, Brenton uses masks to develop a difference between myth and reality. Christie is the story of a sex murderer, based on an actual occurrence, who kills for love. Brenton juxtaposes caricatures of British policemen with a fairly naturalistic Christie, except that, of course, he wears a horrific mask. Brenton himself called this an alienation device. 15 The women Christie kills are plastic dolls. The style works to make Christie, the sex slayer, the most human of those portrayed, while his crimes continue to be horrific. Brenton commented: "It seemed to me that what he was about was love, and that is an uncomfortable fact. As he was based on a real person, he already had the stature of myth or legend and so the undercutting of the myth by playing him naturalistically and the rest of the world as caricature forced a confrontation with unexamined assumptions about criminal acts."16 Audiences have been confused about the proper response to Christie, this simultaneous murderer and victim. Of course, confusion in the sense of sorting through, questioning received ideas and perhaps changing them, is exactly the relationship with the audience Brecht and Brenton most desire. Still, audiences have to learn to accept a different relationship than identification, since that is still the dominant and expected spectatorial behavior.

The problem of the correct interpretation of the main character plagues Brenton as it did Brecht (indicated below in the cases of The Genius and Bloody Poetry). Sometimes actors don't understand what is required, especially when they have been trained in psychological realism. Brenton thinks that English actors are more accustomed to developing characters through their actions and behavior than American actors (who are method trained). He even wonders "whether Brecht actually had a problem ... with the German actor of his time, and that in a way what he was asking for was that he be more English Because there's something cynical, or not cynical, sardonic about the way a lot of actors do stuff here. . . . That is, they will stand no sentimental shit from a playwright about feeling. I mean they put you in your place, particularly English actors, if you're a playwright who wants to talk about soul or feeling."17 English actors may be trained to play with an appropriate detachment, but Brenton's characters have often provoked critical confusion just the same. Brenton believes that, in spite of twenty years of epic plays, British theater critics still don't understand the style: "Despite all the things [plays] we've done, the form still isn't established. . . . Critics can't tell whether they're watching a good epic play or a bad epic play often, because criteria haven't stuck."18 The major factor in this predicament is undoubtedly the continued dominance of psychological realism in commercial plays, films, and television dramas. Coherent characterization is the heart of this style, and its hold on the public, including critics, is hard to break because it is complicit with the ideological structures of late capitalism. 19

Brenton struggles to go beyond the habitual expectations of audience and critics alike to challenge their status quo perceptions. As a socialist committed to change, he shares with Brecht the desire to demonstrate that things might be different than what they are, that history is a product of situation and choice. Brenton's plays have frequently drawn on historical situations while projecting into the

future. Plays about the past, especially The Romans in Britain, have deliberately questioned and punctured popular conceptions of history. Angry critics claimed Romans was an obscene and barbaric play, but its very importance lay in its challenge to traditional views of England, the Romans, Celts, even King Arthur, and in the juxtaposition of 54 B.C., A.D. 515, and 1980 Ireland. In an essay for Critical Quarterly Philip Roberts has argued in detail that, in fact, Brenton's account of history is upheld by standard reference works on the period and concludes that "his selection of detail for dramatic purposes neither distorts history nor manufactures it."20 The extreme reaction in the press and among some "pillars of society" is actually the best indication that Brenton succeeded in historicizing the incidents.21 By calling attention to the parallel between the brutal Roman imposition of their culture on Britain and the similarly brutal imposition by the Protestants on Ireland, Brenton raises political issues about the interpretation of the past and, most important, proper conduct in the future. The relationship of past to present and future is the heart of the historicizing process. Because of its size and complexity, Richard Boone judges Romans to be "the summation of the British epic theater he [Brenton] had been developing throughout the nineteen seventies."22 While I partly agree with Boone's assessment, I think it is important to see the principle of historicization, with its forced confrontation of past, present, and future, as constitutive of Brenton's work, not only in big, overtly historical plays but also in "smaller" plays. Berlin Bertie, for example, gives dramatic representation to the process of disillusion and reassessment attendant on this moment in time in the wake of failed socialism. The play looks like realism but is completely epic, from my point of view.²³

Thus far, I have been describing the relatively stable features of Brenton's work that appear when considered synchronically. The rest of this chapter focuses on three of Brenton's plays from the the mid-1980s to the present. Two of the three plays are absolutely tied to contemporary events—which may mean they will not be revived in the near future, since history has overtaken them. But, then again, Brenton might just revise them, à la Bert Brecht, as he did with the updates of *The Churchill Play* in 1979 and 1984. I chose these plays because they show Brenton's debt to Brecht and also the unique ways he surpasses and transforms the legacy.