A piece which fails to convince in any respect

The Brecht File, a new play at the Berliner Ensemble

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All the ingredients for an interesting and informative play about German playwright Bertolt Brecht were at hand. *The Brecht File*, at the Berliner Ensemble, deals with Brecht's period of exile in America and, in particular, with his persecution as a communist sympathiser by the FBI and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (known as HUAC).

George Tabori, veteran dramatist, Brecht expert and author of *The Brecht File* is intimately familiar with the theme. Tabori was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1914. During the 1930s Tabori worked as a journalist. Exiled from his homeland by the Nazis, Tabori eventually landed in America and made his way to Hollywood, where he came into contact with the European exile community. He met and worked with some of the most prominent anti-fascist artists, including Heinrich and Thomas Mann. He developed film scripts for Alfred Hitchcock and Joseph Losey, among others—and he met Bertolt Brecht on three occasions.

Like many others', Tabori's own career suffered as a result of the post-war anticommunist witch-hunts and he was blacklisted in the film industry. Nevertheless he continued working in America and then in Europe, translating into English and staging plays by Brecht and Samuel Beckett, as well as writing and staging his own pieces. Tabori's work on *The Brecht File* began in 1987, when he planned to make the material into a film. The piece has finally come to light as the opening production of the refurbished Berliner Ensemble under its new director Claus Peymann.

The centre piece of the play is Brecht's interrogation and confession before HUAC in 1947. The committee had been revived by Rep. Martin Dies (a Democrat from Texas) on the eve of the war at the behest of right-wing forces in the American establishment. Amongst its other tasks, the committee had the job of controlling and vetting the immigrant communities who had fled to America to escape the Nazis. In close collusion with the rapidly growing army of secret police led by FBI boss Edgar Hoover, HUAC also extended its tentacles to include domestic opponents of the policies of President Roosevelt.

Dissident writers and artists from Germany were a particular target for Dies and his committee. Houses were bugged, phones were tapped and agents ferried across Hollywood in cars and taxis tailing and gathering information on the public and private intercourse between the European exile community and many prominent Hollywood artists. Thousands of pages of reports were compiled by FBI agents listing the most trivial occurrences in the day-to-day activities of the exiles. After a while the victims of state surveillance themselves realised the significance of the strange men in parked cars operating in shifts outside their houses. (In order to make life more difficult for the FBI Helene Weigel, Brecht's wife, used to relate Polish cookery recipes to friends down the phone.)

The files were eventually used as the basis for a huge operation to purge the entertainment industry and help inaugurate the anticommunist witch-hunt in the US. Brecht was one of nineteen (the Unfriendly Nineteen) figures arraigned to appear before HUAC in October 1947 faced with charges of communist conspiracy. The defendants had agreed among themselves that they should refuse to recognise the jurisdiction of the committee, refuse to answer questions and appeal instead to the American constitution. Following consultations with his lawyers, however, Brecht co-operated with the investigators. To the question, “Are you or were you ever a member of any Communist Party?,” Brecht retorted in the negative on a number of occasions. Most of Brecht's biographers agree that he never officially joined the Communist Party, but that he told the literal truth does not alter the fact that he broke the agreement made with his fellow defendants.

At the end of his cross examination Brecht was praised by the chief investigator for his co-operation: “Thank you very much Mr. Brecht, you are a good example to ... Mr. Kenny and Mr. Crum” (who had both refused to co-operate with the investigators).

The interrogation of Brecht is the central scene in Tabori's new play for which he drew heavily from the 1947 transcript. In the original script of *The Brecht File* and in the

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initial performances of the piece the interrogation scene appeared near the end of the play. In fact, Brecht appeared in just two of the play's ten scenes. Following initial unfavourable press comments, along the lines of “Where is BB?,” Tabori shifted the scene to the beginning of the play. The ease with which Tabori reconstructed his piece says something about its contrived and flimsy character. In fact, *The Brecht File* fails to convince in any respect.

Most of the play is devoted to the activities and machinations of the FBI agents assigned the job of spying on Brecht. The two principal FBI agents, Shine and Gallagher, are presented as gay and we are treated to one scene, for example, in which, during a free moment, the agents tear off one another's suits in a fit of passion and commence making love. A further scene then deals with their marriage as homosexuals (in America! in 1947!). Other scenes depict the agents as idiots and slapstick figures barely able to push a plug into an electric socket.

It is true that there was an enormous growth in the ranks of the FBI during and after the war. And one can safely assume that many of the recruits did not possess outstanding intellects, but why reduce the whole organisation to a cesspool of laughable figures with sexual mores which do not correspond to Tabori's? And if it is the case that, without exception, the FBI was manned by morons, why does Tabori think their slapstick behaviour constitutes sufficient material to hold the interest of his public for over two hours? Why has he chosen such easy targets?

Another scene towards the middle of the play jars. FBI agents Shine and Gallagher pay a visit to Professor Applebaum, a distinguished academic. Applebaum is barbecuing with his wife. During the scene we learn that the wife is a former concentration camp victim. A dialogue develops in the course of which Applebaum humiliates the two agents with his academic brilliance, peppered with quotes from and references to Brecht.

The FBI agents seek Applebaum's co-operation in spying on fellow members of the exile community. They warn Applebaum that if he does not help them they can block his attempt to obtain American citizenship. Applebaum is unperturbed—he has friends in high places in the American administration. He demands the two men leave. The agents pull their ace from the hole. In front of his wife they reveal that they have incontrovertible evidence that Applebaum raped an underage girl. Applebaum is distraught, he finds the nearest tree and hangs himself. Outwardly calm, his wife drenches her dead husband and their house with benzine and sets everything in flames. End of scene.

In reality a number of prominent anti-Nazi dissidents and artists did take their own lives while in exile. Estranged from their homeland, unable to find work or pursue their artistic careers in a foreign land with a different language, alienated from the fascist dictatorship in Germany and the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, a number of the most sensitive and talented artists resorted to suicide. But in Tabori's version, suicide is the alternative chosen by the child molester.

Tabori's world in *The Brecht File* is one without principles, without convictions where, without exception, everyone—secret police and exiles—operates from the basest of motives. A world interspersed with Brecht quotations, usually of the most cynical variety and where, finally, Brecht's betrayal of his co-defendants in 1947 proves to be no big deal. At the same time, the prejudice of the rabid anticommunist is confirmed—at the back of every “fellow traveller” is a sexual pervert.

It is true, of course, that on many occasions in his life Brecht reacted with extreme pragmatism and self-interest in the course of conflicts with the powers that be—albeit in the face of intimidation by the American government and its secret police, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow which had murdered a number of Brecht's closest artistic associates, and the post-war government in East Germany which worked to turn Brecht into a conformist cultural icon. Brecht knew very well of the persecutions taking place—in particular under Stalinism—but he invariably chose to keep his thoughts and criticisms to himself.

In the final scene of the play agent Gallagher confronts Brecht in the airport. Brecht is preparing to flee America and awaits his flight to Europe. With his final question Gallagher asks Brecht if he would be prepared to retract his committee testimony. Brecht replies with a paraphrase from his own play *Galileo*: “Whatever you or I do, the world will keep turning.” In terms of Tabori's play and its theme this concluding line works not only as an epitaph to justify Brecht's own behaviour, but as a general recipe for passivity and resignation in the face of adversity.

The Brecht File, more inadvertently than planned, puts its finger on a significant weakness in Brecht's own character. But to the extent that he reduces everyone in his play to the moral level taken by Brecht in his American HUAC appearance, Tabori has produced an ugly and unconvincing piece of theatre.

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