

# Marat/Sade at the Berliner Ensemble

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Since its first performance in 1964, Peter Weiss' *The Persecution and the Assassination of Jean Paul Marat as performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (hereafter *Marat/Sade*) has become an integral part of German theatre repertoire. The current production at the Berliner Ensemble in the east of Berlin, a theatre associated above all with the name Bertolt Brecht, is nevertheless a historical first. Following Brecht's death in 1956, his wife Helene Weigel, who continued to run the theatre, turned down an opportunity to perform the piece describing it as "counterrevolutionary".

Before addressing the play and the adaptation presented at the Berliner Ensemble it is worth briefly recalling the career and work of Peter Weiss, one of the most thoughtful and challenging literary and artistic figures to emerge in post-war Europe. He first came to prominence in West Germany at the beginning of the sixties.

Peter Weiss was born near Berlin on November 8, 1916. His father was of Austrian-Hungarian-Jewish descent and owned and ran a textile factory. His mother was an actress who worked with, amongst others, renowned Austrian theatre director Max Reinhardt. Peter Weiss' schooling in Berlin was interrupted by the Nazi take-over and in 1934 the family emigrated first to England and then in 1939 to Sweden. Sweden was to remain Weiss' home for the rest of his life.

Throughout his career Weiss sought out and immersed himself in literary and artistic circles. He recalls hearing the newly produced Brecht-Weill pieces *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in 1930. But his own youthful interests led him towards painting and the fine arts. Against the wishes of his parents he concentrated his energies on painting and organised his first exhibition in London in 1936. He gave out the last of his personal income for the rent of the cellar rooms for the exhibition as well as leaflets advertising the event. He records that, lacking seats, he sat on the floor with a friend during the exhibition to which no one came.

Weiss' professed artistic mentors were the surrealists—André Breton, Salvador Dali and Max Ernst—although there is no indication at that point that he shared any of the political leanings, for example, of Breton. Like the leading surrealists he undertook a serious study of psychoanalysis and cultivated a friendship with the German romanticist writer Hermann Hesse for whose books he provided illustrations.

In a letter to his long-time friend Hesse in 1961 Weiss described the conflict which re-emerged continually in his work and was to remain a central tension throughout his artistic life: "I am very preoccupied with the art which first comes about, when reason, rational thinking is switched off. I have been unable myself to resolve this conflict: sometimes it seems to me that the most essential lies in the dark and in the subconscious, then however it occurs to me that one can only work today in an extremely conscious way, as if the spirit of the times demands that the writer does not lose his way in regions of half-darkness. In a state of insanity this pressure is no longer there, then one can pursue every extravagance and wild notions without having to ask what they mean."

His initial literary efforts were in the Swedish language, but in the fifties he turned increasingly to the medium of film, producing a number of experimental and documentary films. His first literary work in German,

*Abschied von den Eltern* (*Farewell to the Parents*, 1959), followed the death of his father and mother. Weiss now concentrated on writing (in German) and in 1963 began working on the script for *Marat/Sade* (set in a lunatic asylum).

In retrospect it is possible to identify *Marat/Sade* as not just an artistic turning point for Weiss but also as his decisive turn toward political material in his work. The sixties saw Weiss moving increasingly to the left. Weiss personally attended the hearings in Frankfurt aimed at uncovering Nazi crimes at Auschwitz and then reworked the material into his play *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*). In 1965 he issued his "10 working points for an artist in a divided world," in which he made public his affiliation to the cause of socialism.

And in a supplement to the "10 points" Weiss was scathing in his evaluation of the broad body of German authors. "The failure on the part of German authors, above all those who went through the war, to speak out forcibly against the general will to forget, that they did not and still do not undertake everything to oppose militarism and nationalism — ... the German authors like most of the authors from other countries, do not represent an advance guard, but rather a rearguard to the extent that they attempt to keep alive 'humanitarian values' in the face of harsh everyday politics."

Infuriated by American atrocities in Vietnam he wrote *Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*. In America and in Europe he spoke at public meetings and rallies condemning the US intervention. Politically he gravitated increasingly towards literary and artistic circles in Stalinised Eastern Europe, who seized upon the opportunity of employing the controversial but acclaimed Weiss as an instrument for their own propaganda.

The closer he moved in such circles, however, the more critical Weiss became of Stalinist politics. In 1968 he openly criticised the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and protested vehemently against the expulsion of East German artist and dissident Wolf Biermann. In 1968 Weiss was for a short time a member of a group which had split off from the Swedish Communist Party.

In 1970 as the Stalinist regimes in Russia and throughout Eastern Europe were preparing celebrations for the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Lenin, Weiss was finishing his own tribute to the "Lenin year" and the October Revolution—a new play entitled *Trotsky in Exile*. In scene after scene the play deals with the various milestones in the life of Trotsky. It is possible to argue about some of the political positions which Weiss attributes to Trotsky. (In his preparation of the piece Weiss had discussions with Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher and Ernest Mandel). But what remains striking about the play is Weiss' valiant effort to correct all manner of Stalinist falsifications, to restore Trotsky to his rightful role in history as a leader of the Russian Revolution at the side of Lenin and as the principal Marxist opponent of the Stalinist degeneration in the Soviet Union.

Of equal interest in *Trotsky in Exile* is Weiss' recognition of the central role of culture in assessing the role of the revolution and of Trotsky's own significance as a historical figure. Weiss had studied Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* and devotes a scene of the play to a discussion between

Lenin, Trotsky and leaders of the Dadaist art movement. In Zurich in 1916 Lenin is known to have met political co-thinkers in the same café frequented by Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and other leading lights of the Dada movement. Weiss takes a small literary liberty and brings the figures together in a discussion over the prospects for art in a post-revolutionary Soviet Union. A later scene features Weiss' old mentor Breton in discussion with Trotsky and Diego Rivera in Mexico.

In his mature notebooks Weiss specified his own view on the relation between art and politics: "Art is never a weapon in the sense of concrete political action. It only conveys activity, it communicates qualities which we have to detect in ourselves. We are the ones who, upon closing in on a work of art, liberate the powers confined within. Without our ability to ingest, our own ability to think, the work remains powerless. However, with our attentiveness we transpose the latent vision into real, perceptible deeds" (*Notebooks*).

When the play received its first performance in West Germany, needless to say, the Stalinist cultural machine was scandalised. Weiss' Russian translator Lev Ginsburg led the offensive and enthusiastically quoted from comments directed against Weiss in the course of the play's premiere. "Give us Lenin, but not Trotsky, you bastard!" for example. Ginsberg went on to accuse Weiss of historical manipulation, falsifying the October Revolution and playing into the hands of capitalist opponents of the Soviet Union.

Weiss' own reply to Ginsburg is virtually unique on the part of a prominent post-war western artist and intellectual in painstakingly rebutting every Stalinist slander made by Ginsberg and rigorously documenting the real role played by Trotsky and the left opposition in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless Weiss was shaken politically and physically by the violent reaction to his Trotsky piece.

Among his very last works was the monumental *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, a novel in three parts, in which Weiss grapples with major political and artistic problems. Written over a period of 10 years, this fascinating work represents the culmination of Weiss' attempt to establish the common ground between society, politics and art in light of the concrete historical experiences of the twentieth century.

To return to *Marat/Sade* —Weiss' play within a play combines historical fact with dramatic fantasy. The action is set at the start of the nineteenth century in the asylum of Charenton run by the Abbé Coulmier. The hospital's most famous patient is the Marquis de Sade (a favourite author of the French surrealists), condemned to confinement by the rising French bourgeoisie under Napoleon for "endangering public morals." First confined to prison, Sade spent his last years (1801 to his death in 1814) confined in Charenton together with other political prisoners as well as the genuinely deranged.

As part of his treatment Coulmier allows his patients to perform in dramas written and staged by Sade. Over time the plays are recognised as a source of entertainment and amusement for the leading layers of the new French society who travel from Paris to attend the performances. Playwright Weiss steps aside and allows Sade to appear as author of a piece devoted to the leader of the French Revolution, Jean-Paul Marat, who was murdered in his bath in 1793 by a young Royalist supporter, Charlotte Corday. Marat was a journalist, member of the Cordeliers Club and was widely regarded as the radical conscience of the revolution up until his assassination.

1793 is also a decisive date in the development of the Revolution itself. In order to ward off foreign invasion the aspiring bourgeoisie has been forced once again to mobilise the broad masses plagued by hunger and discontent. Increasingly radical demands are raised. The revolution enters a new and far more bloody phase.

The entire action of the play takes place inside the lunatic asylum. Sade has allocated the role of various French revolutionary figures to the partly unpredictable/partly ecstatic asylum inmates. From aside the asylum

director intervenes occasionally to curb excesses on the part of the patients/performers. The format of the play draws heavily on the Theatre of the Absurd of Antonin Artaud, which exaggerated the "alienation" component of Brechtian Theatre and emphasised the grotesque to the level of the illogical. The conclusion of Marat/Sade is clear from the very beginning and well known—Corday murders Marat. According to the precepts of absurd theatre, Weiss/Sade has a great deal of free rein in determining the action leading up to the denouement.

In his notes to the play Weiss indicates that the figure Marat suffers from paranoia. In addition Marat is wracked by a painful skin disease which confines him in a bath of water for the entire length of the play. "Oh the itching, the unbearable itching," he complains as his companion binds him with fresh wet bandages. In the Berliner Ensemble production Marat is played by the talented Martin Wuttke. But not only is Marat now rendered virtually powerless by his physical torments, director Philip Tiedemann has added schizophrenia to Marat's list of ailments. In his address to the masses towards the end of the play Marat is *both* peoples tribune and adoring people. On the other hand Sade (somewhat flatly played by Thomas Thieme) is obviously in full control of his faculties. In terms of the play's polemic the scales tilt in favour of Sade.

In fact, Weiss' play draws its power from the exchanges between the libertine, individualist Sade and the dedicated revolutionary Marat. And this is precisely the source of the weakness of the latest production at the Berliner Ensemble. Tiedemann has savagely cut the original Weiss manuscript. Large sections of text have been cut, for example the exchange between Sade and Marat about a third of the way through the play, summing up the differences between the two men:

*Sade:* I am turning my back on these mass movements  
that move in circles

I turn my back on good intentions  
which lead down blind alleys  
I turn my back on all the sacrifices  
that have been made for any cause  
I believe only in myself

*Marat:* I believe only in the cause which you betray  
We've overthrown our wealthy rabble of rulers  
disarmed many of them though  
many escaped  
But now those rulers have been replaced by others  
who used to carry torches and banners with us  
and now long for the good old days  
It becomes clear  
that the Revolution was fought  
for merchants and shopkeepers  
the bourgeoisie  
a new victorious class and underneath them  
the fourth estate  
coming up short yet again

And then towards the end of the play Sade reflects on the role of the "antithetical dialogues" between himself and Marat. At the same time he makes clear his initial support for the revolution which has quickly soured into bitter opposition:

*Sade:* Our intent in creating such dialogues as these  
was to experiment with various antitheses  
to oppose each to each so that we might  
upon our many doubts shed some light  
In my mind I keep things over and over  
but I can't bring the play to a neat closure  
I myself for brute force did proselytise  
yet conversing with Marat I've come to realise  
that brute force in his sense is not what I propose  
that his way is one I've come to oppose

On the one hand the urge with axes and knives  
to change the whole world and improve people's lives  
On the other hand the individual lost in thought  
caught in the throes of the calamity he's wrought  
Thus the question formulated in the play  
remains open in the light of things today

This section, together with other large slabs of text, has been edited. In fact at the end of the play no side is taken. "The question remains open". The last words are left to Marat's former friend, the radical monk Roux: "When will you learn to see, when will you finally understand?" At the play's premiere in 1964 in West Germany, the general interpretation was that Sade emerged as the winner of the exchanges. At its East German premiere in the Rostock theatre the decision went in favour of Marat. Weiss himself declared his preference for the "analytical" East German production (which he also preferred to the famous London production by Peter Brook).

Philip Tiedemann's version, on the other hand, is timid through and through. There is much spectacle and song, sound and fury, but the production lacks the bitter clash of incompatible positions. A social conscience and the advocacy of revolution versus unrestrained individualism and worship of the sensuous ... (and resignation)—is such a polemic so out of fashion these days? Is Weiss' material so out of date? That the play has been shown at the Berliner at all is a small victory, but the current production leaves much to be desired. After all, what did Weiss record in his own notebooks: "Culture is: to dare. To dare to read, to dare to believe in one's own point of view, to dare to express oneself."



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