

# Farewell, Brecht's Last Summer —a convincing portrayal of the playwright in his last days

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The new film by director Jan Schütte— *Farewell, Brecht's Last Summer [Abschied]*—received its international premiere at the recent film festival in Venice and has just opened in Germany. The film deals with one day in the life of poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht. It is August 1956. Brecht has travelled with an entourage of family and theatre co-workers to his holiday dacha at Buckow, in Brandenburg north of Berlin.

The dacha lies in a delightful rustic setting beside a lake—ideal for rambling in the woods and swimming. Brecht is making final preparations for the opening of his *Caucasian Chalk Circle* at his theatre in Berlin. At the same time he is writing poetry. He is running a fever and feeling unwell. For the previous half year he has been plagued by attacks of ill-health and the symptoms of a weak heart. On August 14, three days after returning to Berlin, Brecht will die following a stroke.

At the beginning of the film we see his wife, actress Helene Weigel, carrying out menial jobs in the holiday house while listening to radio. The radio reports that GDR (East German) police are on alert and have erected barricades around Berlin. 1956 was a year of turmoil in the eastern bloc countries. In February 1956 Soviet party secretary and future premier Khrushchev gave his secret speech to the Twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. For the first time Lenin's Testament, with its trenchant criticism of Stalin, was raised at a congress of the party. GDR premier Walter Ulbricht was amongst the 1500 delegates who listened, stunned and amazed, to unprecedented party criticism of the "Great Helmsman."

Although not officially a member of the party Brecht, as the GDR's leading cultural figure, was in continuous contact with inner party circles and was thoroughly acquainted with the contents of the speech. Following a massive popular uprising in Hungary in the summer of 1956 and student protests in Poland and Czechoslovakia, rumours abounded in the GDR that Stalin's man in Berlin, Walter Ulbricht, would be forced to resign. The party and state apparatus were nervous and many East German opposition and dissident figures saw the opportunity for profound changes.

Brecht travelled to Buckow with a large group. His wife was expected to ward off day to day distractions and allow Brecht to work in peace. His daughter Barbara was also present. In a symbolic gesture and to please her mother, Barbara burns her

father's favourite old cap which Helene can no longer stand the sight of. Arising from his bed at the start of the day a weak and debilitated Brecht complains bitterly that he cannot find his shabby old cap—his capacity to work is correspondingly impaired.

Also in attendance are two of Brecht's long-time collaborators and former lovers—Elizabeth Hauptmann and Ruth Berlau. Hauptmann has largely accepted her fate as a mere secretarial assistant in the second ring of planets orbiting around Bertolt Brecht. Berlau strikes a tragic figure, subject to bouts of mental instability and delusions for which she receives periodic doses of electro-shock therapy. Having lost her youth and charms she cannot tolerate playing second fiddle to the young attractive actresses who now court Brecht's favour. She is at violent odds with Weigel, seemingly eager to take over her position as the main prop in Brecht's life.

Plunging naked into the lake nearby is Brecht's latest young and nubile female companion, up and coming actress Käthe Reichel. Later in the day she is joined in the lake by the young dissident publicist and theoretician Wolfgang Harich and his young wife Isot Kilian with whom Brecht has also had an affair.

Harich introduces an overtly political motif in the film. In 1956 together with Walter Janka (head of *Aufbau Verlag*, the main publishing house for Brecht's work in East Germany), Harich was Ulbricht's most prominent and public critic. Both Janka and Harich called for a radical reform of the East German Stalinist party (SED.)

In his treatment of Wolfgang Harich director Jan Schütte and scriptwriter Klaus Pohl have taken some liberties with historical fact. In *Farewell* members of the GDR Stalinist police, the Stasi, turn up at the dacha and warn Weigel that they are preparing to arrest Harich. As the police leave Weigel is torn between the urge to warn Harich of what lies in store for him and the desire to avoid any scandal—above all to protect the physically frail Brecht. In the event Weigel's loyalty to her husband outweighs all other feelings—at the end of the film Harich is arrested by police.

In real life it is true that Brecht was on familiar terms and conducted political discussions with Harich. It was no secret that Brecht was having an affair with his wife. In fact Harich was actually arrested in November 1956. At his trial and following interrogation he was accused of plotting against the GDR and together with Janka sentenced to 10 years in jail. In the course of

his interrogation he declared that in private conversations with Brecht the latter agreed with his own desire for a change in the party regime.

Although the woodland setting of the film is peaceful and idyllic we quickly learn that the Brecht entourage is seething with tension and conflict. Berlau has been drinking heavily and lies in wait for Brecht demanding his attention and affection. He rebuffs her rudely, preferring the company of the young Käthe. In another scene Brecht inadvertently offends Hauptmann. Immediately realising his mistake he is attentive and polite, seeking her forgiveness.

Brecht's whole career was devoted to the theatre and in Schütte's film Brecht's private domain appears as an extension of his life-work. As is the case with his theatre ensemble, it is the private man Brecht who now determines the order of rank in his own household—alternately issuing threats, oaths, soothing words and apologies to maintain some level of order and stability in the group.

The entire entourage comes together to eat lunch. There appears to be a strict rule as to who sits where. One fears the worst and is not disappointed. Berlau launches a stinging attack on Weigel only to be severely admonished by Brecht. In a later scene there is furious competition amongst the women as to who should ride back in the car to Berlin with Brecht. Actor Josef Bierbichler, who recently excelled in a portrayal of Brecht's *Galileo* in Berlin, gives a thoroughly convincing performance as an acerbic Brecht, on occasion charming and polite, sometimes brutally wounding in his choice of reprimand.

One is left with the impression of a man attached to the previous loves in his life as he is to his favourite cap. Reluctant or unable to sever himself from previous relationships, he is left straddling various stools. The consequences in terms of his private life are nightmarish.

Interestingly, in one of his last intimate poems written shortly before his death he says nothing about his personal relationships. Instead he gives very much the impression of a man who would dearly like to live out the rest of his days in (relative) peace and quiet.

#### *Pleasures*

*The first view from the window in the morning*

*The old book found again*

*Enthusiastic faces*

*Snow, the turning of the seasons*

*The newspaper*

*The dog*

*The dialectics*

*To shower, to swim*

*Old music*

*Comfortable shoes*

*To grasp*

*New music*

*To write, to plant*

*To travel*

*To sing*

*To be friendly.*

The applause for the film at its premiere at Brecht's own *Theater*

*am S chiffbauerdamm* was polite but muted. Such an occasion in Berlin inevitably draws a large number of devotees for whom Brecht can do no wrong. Such persons were evidently not struck with the film. In press interviews director Schütte has made no secret of the fact that he has dallied with the real order of events and that occasionally his film strays from historical fact. Such apologies, however, do little to placate the many remaining Brecht purists. The fact is that Schütte's portrayal of Brecht is not especially flattering.

The majority of press reviews have been critical. A number of reviews accuse Schütte of portraying Brecht as a “cowardly dog” and of attempting to dislodge him from his pedestal. In a fit of pedantry the *Berliner Zeitung* complained that lead actor Josef Bierbichler was too tall, 30 pounds too heavy and his voice too deep. The review continued by criticising the film for its “disinterest in truth” and for discrediting Brecht and the national opposition to Ulbricht through the portrayal of Harich as a representative of “senseless revolutionary bluster.”

All in all this particular review made clear that vested political interests are at work which would prefer to retain a memory of Brecht and Harich as consistent opponents of Ulbricht's Stalinist GDR. In fact Harich's proposals for a political alternative in the GDR were, in their own way, as limited as those contemplated by Brecht. The difference between the two men lay in the fact that while Harich openly articulated his criticisms of the regime, Brecht limited his opposition to private discussions, entries in his diaries which he never published or extremely cryptic formulations for public consumption.

Although Harich criticised a number of Stalinist aspects of SED policy and called for a reform of the party regime, his own alternative of a “special German way to Socialism” echoed the essence of Stalin's own nationalist perspective. Similarly Brecht's own criticisms of the party never went beyond proposals for a reform of the apparatus. Towards the end of his life he looked to the China as a possible alternative, declaring his enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution and even placing a picture of Chairman Mao above his desk.

Anyone attending *Farewell, Brecht's Last Summer* in the expectation of seeing the definitive account of the life of Bertolt Brecht will be disappointed. In fact it is difficult to envisage a film which could do justice to the turbulent life and times of one of the leading cultural figures of the twentieth century. Jan Schütte has made a less ambitious, carefully crafted film which bears fruit and throws light on the complex figure of Brecht. The lasting impression of the film is of a man and artist thoroughly exhausted and weighed down by the numerous compromises he had made in both his private and public life. Despite the fact that he cannot claim to be a physical double of Brecht, Bierbichler gives an admirable performance as the German playwright. Monica Bleibtreu is also outstanding as Helene Weigel.



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