

Fifty years since the death of German playwright Bertolt Brecht

The Threepenny Opera and St. Joan of the Stockyards on stage in Berlin

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Official Germany has long had an ambiguous attitude toward one of the country's most gifted poets and dramatists, Bertolt Brecht, who died fifty years ago this month. During the period of the Cold War, Brecht was either heavily criticised or ignored by the vast majority of West German anti-communist critics and politicians, who sought to make political capital out of the artist's choice to settle and work in Stalinist East Germany (GDR).

Although awarded his own theatre, the renowned Berliner Ensemble, in 1947 and provided with the resources necessary to continue his theatre work, Brecht also ran into difficulties with the GDR cultural bureaucracy, whose own version of deadly, so-called "Socialist Realist" art and drama often proved too restrictive for Brecht's own brand of "epic," later "dialectical" theatre.

A Brecht revival of sorts took place during the radicalised 1960s when a new generation of young people and students questioned the premises of postwar capitalism in the Federal Republic (West Germany) and sought to examine and draw out the continuities between postwar German society and prewar Hitlerite fascism. Many looked to the work of Brecht as a source of inspiration. In their eagerness to revive Brecht as a pioneering "socialist" or "Marxist" dramatist, however, far too little attention was paid at the time to the manner in which Brecht's numerous adaptations and concessions to Stalinist politics and cultural dictates distorted his theatrical work.

Since German reunification in 1990 and in the wake of the campaign that proclaimed the triumph of the free market and the death of socialism, little has been seen or heard of Brecht in German theatres until the current anniversary of his death. Now, a half-century after his death, a very "official" Brecht revival is taking place, in which the German political elite is demonstrating considerable "largesse" in welcoming its wayward son back into the fold.

At the same time there are a number of indications that for his part and from beyond the grave, the playwright and poet is intent on resisting the warm embrace from representatives of a social system he rejected and consistently ridiculed in his work.

A series of performances of Brecht plays and readings from his works is taking place across Germany in 2006 and provides an opportunity to re-examine and reconsider his artistic significance. In particular Brecht is currently omnipresent in the German capital of Berlin. His former theatre, the Berliner Ensemble, is featuring a range of his plays performed by German and international theatre companies, and one of the most widely anticipated events in this Brecht year has been a new production of his *Threepenny Opera* at Berlin's newly opened Admiralspalast.

The Threepenny Opera represented Brecht's breakthrough as a playwright following its premiere in Berlin in 1928. The piece is a loose adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), a brilliant and popular social

satire by British poet and dramatist John Gay (reportedly with the encouragement or assistance of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope). Brecht and his collaborator Elizabeth Hauptmann thoroughly reworked Gay's script and transferred the action to London in the 1920s. The original production used innovative theatre techniques and relied heavily on the musical genius of Kurt Weill, who wrote the score for the unusual 'opera.'

The piece was somewhat chaotically put together and rehearsed under the most difficult circumstances (one dress rehearsal went on until 5 am—songs were still being removed and added at the last minute), and there were fears that it might suffer the same fate as all of Brecht's previous works, i.e., closed down after a handful of performances. In fact, the play, which opened in Berlin on August 31, 1928, struck an immediate chord with audiences and was a huge and enduring success.

For both Brecht and Weill, *The Threepenny Opera* represented an attempt to shake up and revolutionise the world of theatre and opera. It was a response, on the one hand, to what they deprecatingly called "culinary" opera, i.e., light entertainment operettas, and, on the other, to the monumental productions epitomised by the work of Richard Wagner, which appealed heavily to the spectator's emotions and drew him or her into a world of idealised images and sensations.

At the same time, *The Threepenny Opera* revitalised the social satire contained in the Gay original, striking out at the hypocrisy of bourgeois society and morals. To entertain and at the same time provoke the audience into looking more critically at society and its own social preconceptions—in many respects, *The Threepenny Opera* remains an outstanding example of the realisation of this Brechtian ambition.

The latest production at the Admiralspalast is directed by Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer (*Mephisto*), who has chosen to stay very close to the original 1928 staging—a decision that has provoked certain critics into terming the production "sluggish," "outdated" and lacking in innovation. While his production is not without its flaws, Brandauer's decision to resist a current and widespread trend to sensationalise and trivialise opera and theatre productions is to be generally applauded. His interpretation at the Admiralspalast allows the audience to reflect on some of the strengths of Brecht's early theatrical work.

The piece consists of a series of loosely organized scenes, with a thoroughly and deliberately contrived ending, and relies heavily on its musical numbers and score. In the Admiralspalast the latter is marvellously performed by the German Film Orchestra, which captures the vitality of Weill's composition. The orchestra even occasionally demonstrates a discreet lack of respect for the original score, a decision of which one imagines the composer would have surely approved.

The female roles are uniformly well played, with an exuberant performance from Birgit Minichmayr as Polly Peachum, who gives a

marvellous rendition of the renowned song, *The Ballad of Pirate Jenny*. One of the former East Germany's most popular actresses, Katrin Sass, revels in the role of the alcohol-swigging and thoroughly down-to-earth Mrs. Peachum. Jenny Deimling excels in her brief appearances as Lucy, the daughter of police chief Tiger Brown.

Regrettably, Brandauer made a poor choice for his leading man. Declaring rock star Campino, lead singer of the punk band *Die Toten Hosen* (Dead Trousers), to be the most "erotic figure on the German stage," Brandauer selected the singer to play the part of the cutthroat, thief and seducer Captain Macheath. Having spent decades playing the angry and aggressive front man to a German punk group, Campino is incapable of portraying any other range of emotion and his thoroughly stilted and hyper-aggressive performance quickly becomes tiresome.

The play derives most of its energy and appeal from Weill's music and the pithy side-swipes at bourgeois morality scripted by Brecht and Hauptmann. We are introduced to Macheath, the master thief and murderer, whose best friend is the chief of police, and Jonathon Jeremiah Peachum (performed by Gottfried John, known best for his work in Fassbinder's films), who heads a syndicate of beggars and regards himself as a respectable businessman in contrast to a disreputable figure like Macheath. In the opening act, we witness Peachum complain about the relative lack of suitable quotations in the Bible that his beggars can use to touch people's heart-strings and thus maximize their takings.

The play contains many of Brecht's most memorable lines—his satirical and vulgar reworking of Marxist materialism: in his attack on Christian soul-saving, "First comes eating, then comes morality," for example, and his critique of the justice system and the world of finance, uttered by Macheath at the end of the play: "What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?" In fact, the latter line only appears in a 1932 version of the script, after Brecht reworked the original piece, which the already Stalinised Communist Party criticised for its "lack of political content."

There is a particular irony in the inclusion of the line about banks in this new production at the Admiralspalast. Brandauer and Campino insist that its insertion into the text was made to demonstrate the production's independence from its financial backer—the Deutsche Bank. The chairman of the Deutsche Bank, Joseph Ackermann, was among the guests at the play's premiere—along with leading members of the German government, e.g., the right-wing interior minister, Wolfgang Schäuble.

After the performance, Ackermann, chairman of Germany's biggest bank, which has raked in record profits in recent years while sacking thousands of its staff, was quite happy to be photographed outside the Admiralspalast with members of Berlin's homeless community, who had been recruited to sell a special edition their newspaper dedicated to the new production.

Ackermann's self assured photo opportunity at the Admiralspalast was matched by the actions of German chancellor Angela Merkel, who, prior to the premiere, accompanied Brandauer to Brecht's office just a kilometre up the road. Merkel, the daughter of an East German pastor and chairman of the conservative Christian Democratic Union, ruminated about how she would have fared in Berlin in the 1930s: "I wonder where I would have been then.... Of course there was a doomsday mood, a crumbling democracy, dramatic political tensions," Merkel told the newspaper *Die Welt*. "Berlin society in the Twenties was about excess, living on the edge. Today we have a much more stable situation, and as a result it is not as exciting. It is probably better that way."

Bland reassurances from the political elite and moral platitudes from the mediocre pastor's daughter to the effect that the situation in Germany bears no comparison to that of the 1930s hardly settle the matter. Unemployment has reached almost five million in Germany and an equivalent number work in low-paid jobs. Poverty is increasingly rapidly, while conditions of "American-style" social polarisation are developing

apace.

Klaus Maria Brandauer offered his own justification for the production: "People tell us they are trying to get unemployment down to three or four million, as if that were a big success ... And still they ask why we are performing this piece? ... That is why this is a timeless piece, eternally relevant ... Germans are searching for solidarity, work, art and frivolity."

Also featuring in a month long series of Brecht plays, performances and events at the Berliner Ensemble is a production of Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, staged by the Spanish company Teatre Lliure and directed by Àlex Rigola. Written under the impact of the Wall Street Crash and first days of the Great Depression, *St. Joan* is a complex and blistering attack on the iniquities of capitalism and comes closest to Brecht's declared aim of turning Karl Marx's *Das Capital* into a theatrical work. Written in 1930, the play was not seen on a German stage until 1959.

The work is set in the slaughterhouses, stock exchange and workers' quarters of a mythical Chicago and features the meat king Pierpont Mauler, who sells his factory in order to bring about the bankruptcy of a rival. The Salvation Army-like Black Straw Hats, led by Joan Dark, distribute soup and alms to the victims of Mauler's activities—the unemployed. For Mauler, the poverty-stricken are themselves to blame for their fate—"before the world can be changed, people must change."

Mauler seeks to convince Joan of the hopelessness of expecting anything positive from the poor and working class. She rebuffs him and declares: "You haven't shown me the evil of the poor, but the poverty of the poor." Joan attempts to adopt the workers' cause, volunteering to deliver a critical message in the midst of a general strike. Unable to combat the perfidies of the capitalist with her philosophy of pacifism, however, and finally defeated by Chicago's cold, Joan dies a tragic death at the age of 25.

With its ironic overtones of Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe and Shaw and its presentation of complex economic relations, Brecht's *St. Joan* is not an easy piece to stage. Long sections of the text are devoted to the cutthroat relations between Mauler, other leading figures in the meat trade, packers, wholesalers, cattle dealers, bankers and middlemen. One of the challenges for any director of *St. Joan* is to find a suitable format through which to convey the business dealings in a dramatic and lively fashion.

Rigola has chosen to update the piece to portray modern globalised finance markets. The middle of the stage is filled by a glass tank in which Mauler, bankers and stockholders carry out their fevered transactions. The production is multimedia. On the right hand side of the stage, a large screen shows live close-ups of the panicking share-holders in the tank as prices plummet. Their frenetic activity, scribbling on scraps of paper and yelling into their mobile phones, is contrasted with film footage showing the monotonous work carried out in a modern mass production food factory. Indistinguishable workers garbed in white overalls and hats skin and prepare thousands of chickens, which race down the production line to land up in a large vat.

During one lengthy passage, where tensions on the floor of the stock exchange are especially fierce, we see footage of a shoal of large sharks pulling apart its prey—organs and blood spread across the screen. The production by a predominantly young ensemble incorporates dance and modern rock and rap music into the story and bristles with energy and indignation.

In many respects, Rigola's production recalls the type of agit-prop theatre popular in the 1960s and 1970s, which all too often substituted anger and sensation for genuinely thought out social criticism and effective drama. To his credit, Rigola gives his performers sufficient opportunity, time and space to concentrate on Brecht's text and towards the end of the play we hear Mauler thoughtfully musing and seeking to draw lessons from his life in the meat trade.

Brecht's conclusion is clear: irrespective of the rationalisations made by

the individual capitalist to justify exploitation, the system has its own logic. The good deeds of Joan have led nowhere by themselves—the only answer is social revolution.

The production was warmly received by the audience at the Berliner Ensemble and, together with the popularity of the current *Threepenny Opera* production, indicates that Brecht still has something to say in the twenty-first century. There is an audience for theatre which takes up political and social themes in a thoughtful manner, and it can only grow.



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