

69th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Brecht: A new film about the famed left-wing German dramatist

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held from February 7 to 17, 2019. The first part was posted on February 15, the second on February 22 and the third on February 28.

Interest in the famed left-wing German dramatist and poet Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is undergoing something of a revival. Recent signs of that renewed interest include the 2014 publication of the important biography of Brecht by Stephen Parker and the 2018 movie *Mack the Knife—Brecht's Threepenny Film*, directed by Joachim A. Lang.

And now, this year's Berlinale featured a new film biography of Brecht by one of Germany's leading directors, Heinrich Breloer (*Die Manns—Ein Jahrhundertroman* [*The Manns—Novel of a Century*], 2001; *Speer und Er* [literally, "Speer and He," released as *Speer and Hitler: The Devil's Architect*], 2005; and *Buddenbrooks* [based on the Thomas Mann novel, released as *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family*], 2008).

Breloer makes films on historical subjects in the manner of so-called documentary dramas. He combines documentary material with dramatic scenes and superimposed comments in a dynamic fashion. In so doing, Breloer has been able to win large television audiences for films dealing with key figures and epochs of German history. He has adopted the same approach for his new work about Brecht.

As Breloer (born 1942) explains in the introduction to the book published to accompany his film, his fascination with Brecht began when he was a student. Already in the summer of 1963, just seven years after Brecht's death, the young Breloer worked together with an individual who was to become one of Germany's most outstanding theatre directors, Claus Peymann, on a production of Brecht's *Antigone*, an adaptation of German poet Friedrich Hölderlin's translation (1804) of Sophocles' tragedy.

Some years later, in the summer of 1977, with a copy of the material assembled about Brecht by Werner Frisch and K.W. Obermeier (published in 1975) in his rucksack, Breloer travelled to Brecht's birthplace, the city of Augsburg in southern Germany, to track down and conduct interviews with

those who had known Brecht personally, including the first love of his life.

Then again in 2010, Breloer undertook what he describes as another journey toward Brecht and began a second round of interviews with those who had worked with Brecht after his return in 1949 to East Germany (GDR) following his flight from Hitler's Germany and 16 years in exile.

These interviews with some of Brecht's closest friends and collaborators determine the modus of the new film, with interview clips juxtaposed with key episodes in Brecht's life.

Breloer's *Brecht* is divided into two parts. The first 90 minutes deal with the writer's early life in Augsburg, his move to Berlin and his later success as a dramatist. In 1914, Brecht, aged just 16, was a strong supporter of Germany's aggression in World War I. He quickly turned against the imperialist war, however, as news of its horrors emerged, particularly in the form of the letters sent him from the front line by his childhood friend, Caspar Neher. Neher later became a famous stage designer, who worked on many of Brecht's productions.

In one early scene in the film, we witness the young Brecht (Tom Schilling) denouncing the war in a school classroom to the horror of his teacher, who immediately threatens the young "traitor" to the German national cause with retribution.

After the war, Brecht was present in Munich when nationalist Freikorps mercenaries brutally crushed the Bavarian Soviet Republic in April-May 1919. At the time, Brecht was closely following the activities of the Independent Social Party (USDP), which had broken from the main body of the Social Democratic Party in 1917. These two events—German capitalism's role in the horrific war and the defeat of the uprisings in 1919 (including the murder of Rosa Luxemburg in January of that tumultuous year)—were to play a decisive role in Brecht's political and artistic development, along with the Russian Revolution of 1917.

In Munich, Brecht turned to the then well-known writer Lion Feuchtwanger, who took him under his wing and helped him in his first stage successes. Breloer then follows Brecht's move to Berlin where he begins to achieve considerable success as a playwright. The pinnacle of this success in the Weimar

Republic comes with the triumphant response to the first production of his (along with Kurt Weill) *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928.

During the late 1920s, Brecht began to study Marxist literature and came increasingly under the influence of the German Communist Party, along with dissident leftist intellectuals such as Karl Korsch. The Stalinisation of the Communist Party and the disorientation of figures like Korsch did not assist Brecht's political development.

In a number of interviews, Breloer refers to Brecht's concern with concealing his private life and persona. Instead, the playwright wanted to be remembered only in terms of his work. "He loved the masks of the classics," Breloer notes. In his new film, Breloer seeks to look behind those "masks" and throw light on Brecht's personal life. He explores in some detail Brecht's complex relations with a number of his closest female co-workers. In so doing he makes clear that Brecht, in his literary and dramatic work, was always intent on collaboration, in developing his ideas as the leading figure of a team.

Breloer's film largely skips over Brecht's period in European exile with his wife Helene Weigel (Adele Neuhauser). In its second half, we see the much older writer, now played by Burghart Klaussner, in the US in October 1947, where he appears before the McCarthyite House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the witch-hunting, anti-communist outfit set up by the House of Representatives.

The day after the HUAC hearing on October 30, during which he declared he had never been a member of the Communist Party (which was true, strictly speaking), Brecht returned to Europe. He ultimately moved to Stalinist East Germany two years later, where he was able to recommence his literary and dramatic work. In 1953, he finally received his own theatre, the Berliner Ensemble.

Brecht's Faustian bargain with the Communist Party had profound consequences for his artistic development. In his book, Breloer notes that the Stalinist archives in Moscow described Brecht in the 1930s as a "Trotskyite," based on the playwright's links to co-workers such as the actress Carola Neher, who, along with her husband Anatol Becker, was denounced as a Trotskyist. Becker was executed in 1937 and Carola died in the Stalinist gulag in 1942.

In fact, although he admired Trotsky's writings highly, Brecht rejected the latter's analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy as counter-revolutionary. While he continually came into conflict with the nationalist-philistine Stalinists in East Germany after the war, Brecht repeatedly sided with the GDR and Soviet bureaucracy at crucial junctures, most notably when he publicly supported the regime of Walter Ulbricht following the East German workers' uprising in June 1953. Having provided the bureaucracy vital public backing, Brecht, at the same time, drafted notes criticising Stalin and his policies. These notes, however, always ended up safely in his drawer.

The Ulbricht regime was well aware that Brecht's work did

not fit into its repressive, anti-Marxist straitjacket of "socialist realism," but decided the playwright and his theatre company—always under close observation from the state security service—could function as an important safety valve to prevent social layers disenchanted with the system from challenging it head-on. Brecht, in turn, was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize in Moscow a year before his death. Breloer's film depicts these events very well.

Equally, Brecht also made artistic compromises—such as shifting the action of his plays to past centuries and other continents and creating "fables" or allegories—so as to avoid a direct confrontation with the bureaucracy. Important sequences toward the end of the film show Brecht in the process of rehearsing a number of his later works, including *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Life of Galileo*.

Breloer's film implies that *Galileo* most closely resembles the trajectory of Brecht's life and career: Galileo (1564-1642), the outstanding astronomer and physicist, who strikes a pact with the Papacy and renounces his scientific discoveries to avoid punishment by the Church, on the one hand, and Brecht, a remarkable poet and dramatist, who cut his own deal with the Stalinist bureaucracy to continue his work, on the other.

Breloer's film and accompanying book provide an opportunity for a younger generation to acquaint themselves with a key literary figure of the 20th century. The film is due to be shown on German television on March 22 (Arte) and March 27 (ARD).

The revived interest in Brecht, who has been treated as a "dead dog" or worse by the academic and official intellectual world for decades, is another indication of a growing radicalisation.

To be continued



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