

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Brecht, Berthold

The Achievement of Berthold Brecht. Berthold Brecht (1898-1956) was a German poet, dramatist, theater producer, and adherent of Marxism, who put his political insights to work in new visions of the nature of theater, and of its relation to the audience.

The Life of Berthold Brecht. Berthold Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria. At the time of Brecht's birth, his father worked for a paper mill, of which he was to become managing director in 1914. (Thus despite Brecht's later claims to have been brought up in Marxist appropriate working class conditions, Brecht was a child of the middle class.) Brecht's mother was pious and supportive, and importantly responsible for Berthold's intimate knowledge of the Bible, which supported him in many ways throughout his life. While other great German writers of the modern period typically carved out their thought paths in the course of advanced University study, Brecht found events projecting him into the world, where he was to discover life, and the social setting for his literary work. Brecht's first sense of WWI was the desire to participate with his fellow countrymen, but he changed his mind as he saw the ravages of the war, and on the advice of his father, who urged him to enroll in a medical course which would qualify him for exempt status. At the same time, while the War raged, Brecht was finding his social theatrical milieu, starting with his lifetime friendship with Caspar Neher, who was to be the set-design collaborator for many of Brecht's finest stage works. Not only was Brecht positioning himself, in Berlin theater life, as a designer, producer and adapter—in addition to much collaborative work he was into the creation of such 'epic theater' as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Woman of Szechuan*—but he was creating startlingly original socially observant poems, as in the volume *Domestic Breviary* (1927). He was an avid consumer of popular Berlin theater, vaudeville, slapstick—a great admirer of Chaplin, and of the music hall creations of Franz Wedekind—and from life on the Berlin streets he was forging both a dramatic genius and a sense for the drama of the times. As so many of his most gifted German colleagues, the twenties were a period during which great creativity and great anxiety were blended. That crisis on the horizon, which George had anticipated, was the daily bread of Brecht, whose own Marxism—he had been educating himself in Marx and Lenin—was fed by the mounting struggle against Nazism.

Exile and after. In 1935, knowing he was tightly pursued by the Nazis, Brecht moved to Denmark, then, in 1939, went to Sweden, preparatory to following one branch of the exile tribe to America. In America, like many self-exiled Germans, Brecht came under suspicion for Communist sympathies, and was called before the House Un American Affairs Committee, by which he was set free of all charges. In 1947 he returned to East Germany, where he was to receive the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954, and to spend the remainder of his life.

Brecht's Work. As a lyric poet, but especially as a dramatist, Brecht was from start to finish socially involved. His work as a dramatist was also work as a member of society, setting up actions within the citizenry; thus Brecht regularly incorporates, in his plays, a *Verfremdungseffekt*, Alienation Effect, designed to make the drama itself seem like a social action, and not a piece of literature. The societal impulse, at work here, took large scale form in Brecht's commitment to Communism. This playwright long allied himself to the East German and East European political perspective instituted during the Cold War. The finest of his plays, like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* or *The Good Woman of Szechuan* throw light on social organizations still unrealized, but part (possibly) of social shapes that will extend out beyond the social period we inhabit in this Encyclopedia.

Reading

Primary source reading

Brecht, Berthold, Letters, 1913-1956, trans. John Willett.

Secondary source reading

Benjamin, Walter, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Bostock, 1983.

Further reading

Fuegi, John, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama*, 2002.

Original language reading

Mittenzwei, Werner, *Das Leben des Berthold Brecht*, 2 vol., 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Review some Brecht plays—The Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Good Woman of Szechuan—to see what in effect he means by a theater of alienation, in which the audience is to be forbidden the Aristotelian pleasure of catharsis. Can you see a good case for this innovative view of theater?

Brecht emerges as a collaborative playwright, performing many roles himself, and working with many fellow producers. Was the same kind of collaborative production at play in the dramatic work of Goethe and Schiller? Lessing?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht

- People remain what they are even if their faces fall apart.
- But something's missing (Aber etwas fehlt).
- A man who strains himself on the stage is bound, if he is any good, to strain all the people sitting in the stalls.
- The theater-goer in conventional dramatic theater says: Yes, I've felt that way, too. That's the way I am. That's life. That's the way it will always be. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is no escape for him. That's great art — Everything is self-evident. I am made to cry with those who cry, and laugh with those who laugh. But the theater-goer in the epic theater says: I would never have thought that. You can't do that. That's very strange, practically unbelievable. That has to stop. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is an escape for him. That's great art — nothing is self-evident. I am made to laugh about those who cry, and cry about those who laugh.
- Let nothing be called natural
In an age of bloody confusion,
Ordered disorder, planned caprice,
And dehumanized humanity, lest all things
Be held unalterable!
- Literary works cannot be taken over like factories, or literary forms of expression like industrial methods. Realist writing, of which history offers many widely varying examples, is likewise conditioned by the question of how, when and for what class it is made use of.
- Do not rejoice in his defeat, you men. For though the world has stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again.