

Review of *Bertolt Brecht*, Meg Mumford (London & New York: Routledge 2009)

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Bertolt Brecht by Meg Mumford is part of the Routledge Performance Practitioners series that offers introductory guides to the key theatre-makers of the twentieth century for students. Each volume in the series follows a format that covers biographical information, explanation of key theoretical writings, a glossary, descriptions of significant productions and practical exercises. While they combine the functions of textbook, guide and student handbook, each is underpinned by new research that assists with the re-interpretation of old knowledge. In the case of Brecht, Mumford has sourced a number of images of the plays in production including rare images of the 1950 Berliner Ensemble production of *The Tutor* to illustrate the *gestus* of showing. She also reproduces the youthful Brecht's only stage appearance as Benny-the-musician in a Karl Valentin cabaret from 1920 that I have only seen elsewhere in Joel Schechter's edited collection *Popular Theatre*.

The book sets in motion a trajectory that sees a rebellious young poet resisting authority; a maverick socialist who can't bring himself to join the communist party; a dissident artist in Hitler's Germany; an émigré in the US, capitalism's world headquarters and finally a theatre director in the Soviet-run GDR, troubled by the authoritarianism of the regime but supportive of the dictatorship of the proletariat, observing but not participating in the workers' strike of 1953 and working all the time on the idea of epic theatre. (Let's get the elephant on page one out of the way right now. Brecht's dates are 1889-1956 not 1989-1956: an acute and embarrassing error for all concerned but not indicative of the book as a whole.)

The contemporary perspective historicises Brecht, as he would expect, and criticises him, as Heiner Müller said we should. But its criticism is not of the bitter personal attack-kind that characterises John Fuegi's psycho-sexual analysis of Brecht's personality and relationships. Rather it deploys a more productive kind of critique that produces new understandings of Brecht for our times. This contemporary approach necessarily adopts a post-communist perspective that views Brecht's socialist utopia as 'quaint and dusty', but also reaffirms 'Brecht's diagnosis of the ills of capitalist society'. Published in 2009, during capitalism's global financial crisis, Brecht's anti-capitalism carries new resonance if not relevance.

The historication of Brecht is built on extensive research into the times in which he lived and worked including especially the historical, political and aesthetic arguments with which the work engaged. The book's achievement is the deft interweaving of the historical, political and the aesthetic forces that shaped, motivated, interrupted and underpinned Brecht's life in theatre. Mumford does not suggest, however, that Brecht was merely a man of his times, but that an understanding of the times is crucial to a proper understanding of the work. For instance, Brecht's insistence that theatre should intervene in the social sphere and actively persuade actors and spectators to rethink their social relations is not as naïve as it appears today. He made theatre in an era in which it played a far greater public role than it does today, when it was an active discursive space in the way that media is today. The book helps make the point that as far as western Europe is concerned, Brecht worked during the last great period of theatre as a cultural force.

Mumford introduces new metaphors into the Brechtian critical imaginary. One of these is of Brecht's life as one of 'flux' that de-constructs the solidity now attached to the

founder of modern political theatre in favour of mobility, change, dialogue, adaptability and process. There is a subtle postmodern and feminist interpretive framework in evidence that offers contemporary students a more likable, less dogmatic and more process-driven Brecht. Ruth Berlau, Elizabeth Hauptman and Margarete Steffin are woven into the discussion of collaborative processes in a way that normalises (rather than hystericises or makes an exception of) the role of the female in the creative work. States of 'flux' are set against the solid formations of Capitalism, Nazism, World War Two and the GDR and there are accounts of Brecht hitting up against these edifices with strategic modes of resistant practice. The writing of the teaching plays, for instance, is located within the formative context of the financial collapse of 1929. They served the twin purpose of opposing capitalism with socialism and countering the heightened rhetoric of Nazism with sober analysis. The cool detachment associated with Brechtian theatre is given a new understanding as a strategic counter to the violence, 'emotive rhetoric' and spectacle of Nazism.

Mumford's view of Brecht's work as 'pleasurable production' gives the lie to the dry and unemotional reputation of Brechtian theatre, especially among secondary school students. 'Like a children's nursery on a sunny day', she writes, 'an atmosphere of playful experimentation, humour and relaxation' characterised the Berliner Ensemble in 1950s, when Brecht finally had the theatre space, the people and the resources to open his ideas to the test of practice. Incredible as this may appear, the playground metaphor does overturn the Grotowski-Schechner idea of theatre as a laboratory. The view of the Berliner Ensemble as an experimental cultural playground allows for the fun and laughter but also the shouting, temper tantrums and tears that go with play and passionate dialectical theatre. Countering Brecht's reputation as a bully, Mumford offers glimpses of a surprisingly tender director working in a non-authoritarian way with actors. The playground metaphor also allows for the minute attention to detail, for obsessive play and repetition but also a sociable, noisy and busy theatre. The playground is a fresh approach – a more fluid, contemporary, and feminist sense of theatre as an open-ended process than the scientific model of the laboratory allows. While the playground metaphor will irk some readers, it is precisely the naive aspect of creativity and idealism and the pleasurable sense of theatre-making that are often lost in scholarship.

Many readers will not be so familiar with the controversial GDR period and the problem of running a theatre company under the 'real existing socialism' of post-war East Germany. In a practice that Mumford refers to as 'the pedagogy of peace and reconstruction', socialist reconstruction called for a new kind of empathetic theatre that familiarised audiences with the new conditions. These state imperatives impinged on Brecht's formalism to the extent that to direct Erwin Strittmatter's *Katzgraben* in 1953, a contemporary GDR play about the virtues of the land reform program, Brecht was no longer critiquing and estranging bourgeois ideology but praising socialist achievements. Of this about-face, Mumford writes:

Having mastered the art of defamiliarizing the known, Brecht now experimented with familiarization strategies in order to give his city audiences access to the 'foreign' world of rural life. (42)

Here she weighs up the shifting relationship between formalism and realism that had dogged Brecht since the 1920s and became more acute in the 1950s. Readers will be surprised to learn that the changed situation of reception saw him utilising the techniques of Constantine Stanislavski who is often seen as Brecht's theoretical and practical opposite. While the pressure to conform to socialist realism is acknowledged as a contributing factor here, Mumford makes the wider point that Brecht, ever the

pragmatist, saw his task as equipping young actors with a 'range of tools' to both defend and criticise the GDR. His death in 1956 came as new contradictions between theory and practice emerged.

The chapter on Brecht's key theories condenses and distills the deeply complex and highly contested terms *verfremdungseffekt* and *gestus*, that are brilliantly illuminated by examples from Brecht's own practice. Mumford extends the play metaphor into her discussion of the evolution of *gestus* to show how it communicated new insights from the rehearsal space. For example, how he 'played' with Latin, Germanic and Marxist connotations of the word. Her definition of *gestus* as:

To present artistically the mutable socio-economic and ideological construction of human behaviour and relations (54)

is both explanatory and challenging, economical and complex; theoretically dense but practically grounded.

The centrepiece of the book is the new research at the Brecht Archive into the 1954 Berliner Ensemble production of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, that was staged under 'the shadows of Hitler and Stalin' at the start of the Cold War (103). The account rescues the play from the melodrama that is often attached to its fable of love and justice and re-emphasises Brecht's view that the play was an embodiment of performance strategies that were always grounded in the political situation. Hence the chalk circle's rejection of the 'ties of blood and racial purity' that was so favoured by the Nazis as well as its engagement with postwar reconstruction in the new socialist state. There are wonderful detailed accounts of Brecht's work with Angelika Hurwicz, who played Grusha, and Ernst Busch's Azdak including the rape trial.

As Brecht said, 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating!' and this book makes the baffling and difficult Brecht clear and accessible, without being reductive. This is a scholarly and practical book that encourages readers and introduces them gently to Brechtian theatre.

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