

# REVIEW 1

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# REVIEW 1

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*St. Brecht  
of the  
Theatrical  
Stock  
Exchange*

*by  
Eleanor Hakim*



The purpose of this essay is to discuss the radical nature of art—in this case, drama—and the way in which it is utilized in present-day American society. The plays of Bertolt Brecht provide a particularly fruitful test case for this study insofar as his works, which were explicitly intended to function as more than “culinary” entertainment, are today becoming hot commodities on the theatrical stock exchange. During the past decade, what might be called market research in the off-Broadway and university theaters, and, more recently, in summer stock, has primed and whetted Broadway audiences for a slew of prestigious productions of the most radical plays of the twentieth century.

Left-wingers and left-liberals alike, have drawn comfort from the box-office appeal of Brecht's plays, interpreting the emergence of a Brecht cult as a liberalization in the prevailing ideology. Left-wingers, feeling a vicarious stirring of a revolutionary fervor, take delight in the promulgation of a socialist message on the American stage; while tired radicals and left-liberals support these plays out of nostalgia for a cause presumably lost. However, both responses are no more to the point than those of the Establishment liberals who view the productions strictly in terms of their formal characteristics, and who later announce proudly that they weren't moved in the least; that it was harmless, unrevolutionary fare after all.

Attitudes of either praising or blaming a work of art according to the extent of its social impact derive from

the erroneous expectation that the work of art, in itself, can countervail existing political and ideological values. But the social organization which generates these values, now relatively stabilized, is capable of accommodating perspectives which are at variance with it. Today, instead of revitalizing society, art is devitalized by the social use—specifically as commercial entertainment—to which society reduces it. And such changes in the social utilization of a work of art result in a change in its meaning—which is accomplished by a subtle manipulation of the cultural apparatus, that is, of the very process and means by which a work of art is brought to the public in this era of speculators, promoters, and middlemen.

Unlike his well-meaning champions, Brecht understood that a commodity-oriented society does not allow its cultural apparatus to be appropriated for a radical function; rather, the apparatus appropriates, distorts, nullifies, and uses art for its own ends. “The apparatus do not work for the general good; the means of production do not belong to the producer; and as a result his work amounts to so much merchandise, and is governed by the normal laws of mercantile trade. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Brecht realized that although the artist is “theoretically in a position to appoint a new function for the theater,” in fact “the theater itself resists any alteration of its function”: “This apparatus resists all conversion to other purposes, by taking any play which it encounters and immediately changing it so that it no longer represents a foreign body within the apparatus. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

To counteract the neutralizing effects of a theater apparatus that disseminates hypnotic illusion like a dream factory, Brecht developed such innovations in the drama and opera as epic theater techniques, the alienation-effect, music as *gestus*, and parable treatment to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in contemporary social institutions. But despite his efforts to inculcate a "critical attitude" in the spectator, the audience remains free to evade a confrontation with the "historical" view, by occupying itself with no more than the formal aspects of the theatrical experience. Brecht, a genuine artist, did not attempt to infiltrate the mind with ideology; rather, he attempted to create a theater of consciousness, reason, and choice. And this is precisely why it is possible for the audience to get the message, and to choose to reject it.

To be sure, Brecht wanted the actor to use the alienation technique to effect social consequences: "He prompts the spectator to justify or abolish these conditions according to what class he belongs to."<sup>3</sup> But there remains a third alternative: the spectator can acknowledge the truth of the demonstration and then choose neither to justify nor to abolish these conditions. Rather, he can choose to ignore the social application of the lesson; the spectator can refuse to apply the logic of art to altering the chaos of life. The point then would be at least to make the spectator aware that his choice *is* conscious.

But spectators whose interests have been conditioned in terms of an apposite value system cannot be radicalized merely by exposure to a radical play. In a society where art does not play a vital role in life, and where learning

has been reduced to a commodity,<sup>4</sup> the audience as a whole will choose to respond by being "refreshed" rather than by being moved to make new social choices.

However, this reflects upon neither the failure of the play nor the failure of the playwright's methodology and technique; rather, it reflects upon the failure of a specific society or segment of society at a particular point in time and conditioned by a particular set of circumstances. That is to say: the qualities which constitute the artistic value of the play remain inherent in it, and the artist cannot be held responsible for the limitations of his audience—particularly when his audience is viewing his work in a period and milieu different from that in which the work was created. Brecht's understanding that "the radical transformation of the theater" has to "correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time,"<sup>5</sup> remains perhaps more tragically true for us today than it was for German society in 1927.

The onus then, is not upon the artist, but upon the society which, when exposed to new points of view and fresh perspectives that may illuminate the fabric of its life, rejects this plane of encounter and focuses its interest on peripheral and superficial value fragments of the whole. In terms of the social psychology of audience responses, can it not be said that such an audience is reacting in an inflexible, unhealthy, stultified, and ultimately neurotic manner? And does not the repetition of such an inadequate response indicate a failure in the vitality of the democratic spirit which implies the ability to make new and meaningful choices commensurate with the new situa-

tions and changes occurring in an ever evolving reality? Furthermore, if culture is defined as the enlightenment and refinement of taste and understanding acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training and experience, it can be said that such audiences which refuse to expand their social viewpoints and value systems or to learn from the experience with which the drama confronts them, remain uncultured, no matter how often they are exposed to the works that are currently in vogue. In this respect, they remain essentially philistine, no matter how many theatrical performances they religiously bring their bodies to, and no matter how many titles and artists they are capable of naming.

As a prerequisite for creating a healthy, flexible, and democratic society, the artist must be reinstated in his socially regenerative role. To this end the critic should apply himself. We must restore to the cultural process its inherent function: that of providing an existential consciousness of oneself and of reality which may enable the individual and the social unit to be open to change, development, and growth in making effective and authentic choices—be it personal, psychological, philosophical, social, or political.

The task of the critic today should be to aid the audience in articulating and comprehending the dynamics of the work of art and the aesthetic and intellectual value-system of the artist inherent in it. Instead, the relationship between present-day American theater and society is such that the critic performs the function of public relations man, making the work of art palatable by presenting it in

superficial terms which fit the narrow perspectives and status-quo values of the audience, rather than educating the audience to grasp the essential dynamics of the work of art, and the way in which such dynamics may expand the limits of the current mode of perceiving reality. Moreover, the critic today serves the function of providing elaborate rationales and mechanisms by which the audience can evade a confrontation with what may be innovating and unsettling in the work of art.

The point to be made here, particularly as it applies to the production of Brecht's plays in America, has to do with the manner in which critics and promoters attempt to mediate between art and the audience—not in order to increase the audience's comprehension of the nature of the work of art, but in order to make the work of art adapt to the tone and temper of the audience. By this means, art is prevented from expanding the horizons of the society. The work of art and the subsequent response to it is emasculated, devitalized, rationalized, so that conformity to the limitations of the society is retained. People are encouraged to see no more than they want to see; they can be safely entertained without being enlightened.

We might well ask, now that Brecht is in vogue, just what is it that liberal New York audiences have been seeing and acclaiming? For the apparatus of the commercial theater has succeeded, by and large, in deradicalizing the essential dynamics of his plays. Brecht, after his death, has been appropriated and canonized by those very same manipulative forces that he depicted in *St. Joan of the Stockyards* and against which he dedicated

a lifetime of opposition. Thus, the personal mechanisms by which an individual avoids a confrontation with the essentials of a drama are augmented by social mechanisms of defense and by rationales provided by the mediators of drama. These mechanisms deserve to be categorized.

### Brecht Among the Moguls

A play is promoted as exotic, chic, intellectually "in" and "avant-garde" to give it snob appeal. The audience is conditioned to have an ego-stake in simply attending the performance, with the corollary of being challenged to feel that they are equal to if not above it. There is no incentive to understand the play, but merely to be able to say something about it—either by praising or deprecating it—which asserts the playgoer's Brahmin status. The philosophic, stylistic, or political radicalness of the play can be made to seem tantalizingly daring; the audience is permitted to limit its response to self-congratulation at exposing itself to "dangerous" drama without changing its day-to-day consciousness of human and social reality.

Harold Clurman, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*<sup>6</sup> in an effort to drum up trade for the 1963 Broadway opening of *Arturo Ui*, began his generally informative article with the question: "Have you ever heard of Bertolt Brecht?"—adding that such a question might be considered as an insult by the "English, French, Swiss, Scandinavian, Israeli, or even Japanese playgoer."

As for Brecht's social and political views, Clurman writes: "During the early thirties, Brecht sought a dis-

cipline to counteract both the turmoil within him and the external public breakdown. He found it in Marxism."<sup>7</sup> (The reader with a vital sense of history will realize that the phrase, "external public breakdown," is a gloss for Nazism, the Second World War, concentration camps, and crematoriums.) But Clurman coyly adds that even those "didactic" plays "rose above politics through a subtle artistry which always says something more than, and different from, their presumed 'lesson.'" Surely, this is a back-handed compliment, when it was exactly this synthesis between concept and subtle artistry that Brecht, like any other engaged artist, was striving for.

Again, in regard to the plays of Brecht's mature period, written between 1943 and 1949 (*The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Private Life of the Master Race*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*), we are assured that, "What distinguishes them is not what they 'preach' but their universally human import and their theatrical originality."<sup>8</sup> Universalizing in such a spirit is a typical expression of what Sartre terms the "abstract liberalism" which acknowledges the outsiders under the general category of being men, but at the price of denying them as "concrete and individual products of history."<sup>9</sup>

### Brecht sans Bite

Production values can sentimentalize the play and reduce it to the lowest common denominator of entertainment. Using an analogy aptly suited to the mores of a sophisticated summer colony, the reviewer of the *East*



*Hampton Star* found the road version of *Brecht on Brecht* "soporific," complaining that

what little is left of him has been house-broken like some embarrassingly large poodle, powdered, put on a leash and muzzled down to a small bark and no bite. Bertholt Brecht was a man, however, not a dog. A man who tried to achieve humanity and freedom for himself and others through political action: every play, poem, or song was an act of agitation propaganda. To perform Brecht for purely aesthetic qualities is not performance but denial.<sup>10</sup>

Writing of the ANTA revival of the socially and politically emasculated *Brecht on Brecht*, Saul Gottlieb in the *Village Voice* astutely commented that

the Brecht that this show gives us is not only partly-Brecht, but a Brecht that never was, a Brecht that fits in neatly with the liberal self-image: anti-Nazi, pro-poor, Broadway—clever, intellectual, disdainful of actors, sentimental about prostitutes, and a man of good will. Well, the Brecht boom is on, and there's no sense rocking the boat, especially if you want a full house every night. It's no accident that much of the show is a reprise of the Marc Blitzstein version of "Threepenny Opera," which translated the bite of the original text down into the sardonic mood of American ex-radicals of the 50's.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, as the *Threepenny Opera* ground its way into its second and third years (with many cast changes), increased emphasis was put upon its raciness and leering shock value for the benefit of those who were now coming

from the backwaters of the outerlying boroughs to witness its libertine naughtiness.

### Inept Versatility

The late Living Theatre Company had pioneered the presentation of avant-garde drama with sincerity, zeal, and fundamental integrity—a good example was the 1960-1961 production of Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities*, for which Khigh Dhiegh, in his characterization of Shlink, won the Obie off-Broadway award. However, in time, the Company began to show flaws which ironically derived from the dynamic leadership of Julien Beck and Judith Malina. Youthful enthusiasm and dedication came to be the main measure, in place of the effort needed to create a corps of actors who were talented, professionally disciplined, experienced, and versatile. Certainly, the Becks are versatile, but possibly they are too versatile in the sense that they take tasks upon themselves for which they are perhaps not best suited. For example, a repertory company should have more than one mature character actress. Although she tried to mold it to her range, Judith Malina failed to be sufficiently big or gutsy when she took over the role of Widow Begbick in *Man Is Man*. Consequently, an accidental quality of caricature crept into her performance. In order to give depth, range, and color to a production, a commitment to theater must be channelled into the perfecting of technique, timing, stage presence, and subtlety of characterization. In this respect, the Living Theatre came to represent "off-Broadway" in one of its negative connotations: that of being amateurish.



## ST. BRECHT OF THE THEATRICAL STOCK EXCHANGE

But if off-Broadway, in its hand-to-mouth existence, lapses into an amateurish misuse of versatility, Broadway does so professionally as a conscious policy investment, by choosing those who are least qualified but who have the most drawing power. For the first New York production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, producer Cheryl Crawford chose popular choreographer Jerome Robbins as "director of his first straight play on Broadway."<sup>12</sup> He, in turn, chose the equally popular Anne Bancroft to play the lead because he had been "planning to direct Miss Bancroft in a musical about Fanny Brice, but completion of the script was delayed. It was because he envisioned Miss Bancroft as Fanny Brice that he could also see her as an ideal Mother Courage."<sup>13</sup> According to such logic, we can now look forward to "Funny Girl" Barbra Streisand being cast as Medea.

Although the sets and blocking were copied from the pictures in the Berliner Ensemble's Model Book, the New York production failed to infuse *Mother Courage* with a life of its own. The production remained as flat and as two-dimensional as a photographic reproduction. The acting, with the major exception of Zohra Lampert as Katrin, was on the level of a television melodramatic comedy. Barbara Harris played the early camp-following scenes of the whore Yvette as if she were a recently deflowered mid-western co-ed. Her later scene, when she reappears after having married into middle-class respectability, was played for grotesque parody in a Second City style totally out of character with the rest of the play. This was particularly incongruous since Yvette makes this reappearance as a

fat, ugly, gouty woman—while Bancroft, as Mother Courage, had neither aged, developed, nor deepened, in spite of the passage of years chronicled in the play. Overly youthful and of an insufficient range, Miss Bancroft tried to keep in check her singularly hysterical style of acting developed in that "psychological theater"<sup>14</sup> which utilizes a play as a "vehicle for temperament,"<sup>15</sup> and which Brecht had explicitly attempted to alter.

Consequently, intimidated by the role confronting her, Miss Bancroft played the shrewd old canteen woman very close, small, and shallow—more like a kid mimicking her elders than like a grown woman and mother of grown children. Her failure to convey adequately the character of Mother Courage was manifest in the fact that she did not really know how to pluck a chicken; she merely picked at it. Based upon observations of the mannerisms of immigrant shopkeepers in the Jewish-Italian section of the east Bronx,<sup>16</sup> her characterization conveyed familiar gag inflections rather than mordancy. If she succeeded in keeping the audience from identifying with Mother Courage, the petty war profiteer, she failed to keep them from sympathizing with Anne Bancroft, the actress. "Poor thing, she's so frail, and look at that heavy wagon she has to drag along all by herself now; she must be exhausted," was a general reaction. But in all fairness, one must say that by the end of the play, Miss Bancroft looked less like Fanny Brice and more like the war-orphan Dondi of the comic strips.

*Mother Courage and Her Children* closed after 19 previews and 52 performances. Poor Brecht. At that point,

a moratorium should have been declared on productions of his plays until people learned how to produce him properly and how to take him seriously, rather than how to play him for his box-office prestige like a second rate hack from tin pan alley. Instead, these failures were even more grossly exaggerated in the Broadway presentation of *Arturo Ui*. Christopher Plummer played the Chaplinesque Great Dictator with a technical proficiency that became an end in itself, while a pasteboard circus tent atmosphere mushroomed around him. The jangling doggerel, laced with American slang and vernacular expressions of George Tabori's adaptation, the vulgar Catskill Mountains style music of Jule Styne, and Tony Richardson's hackneyed sight-gags direction, would have shamed even Milton Berle.

The première had originally been set for November 14, 1963, with previews running up until then. Instead, the play opened on November 11; closing notices were posted before the November 13 matinee, with the newspapers carrying the story the following day that the play would close on the 16th. It was all over after seven performances, leaving many would-be theater-goers still clutching their ticket money or invalidated preview stubs. The not-taking-many-chances, non-profit David Merrick Foundation had initially put up \$75,000 for the production; the final expenditure ran close to \$200,000. The *New York Times* declared it "a failure in adaptation, direction, and performance."<sup>17</sup> So much for Merrick's boondoggle "poor man's answer to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts."<sup>18</sup>

### Out-Heroding Herod

The intentional Americanizing, colloquializing, and jazzing-up of the language and manner of delivering lines (e.g., *Mother Courage, Arturo Ui*) has the effect of causing the audience to respond with a boisterous laugh of recognition, and to follow the play only from familiar idiom to familiar idiom, dissociating language and gesture from action and meaning.

An example of this is the potpourri of *Brecht on Brecht* in which six different actors archly performed in six different styles, the rationale being that the assembling of these snatches of poems, aphorisms, and scenes requires a special approach. Brecht's theory of acting, that the audience remain aware at all times of the actors as actors, was mis-translated into Dane Clark's boyishly winking at the girls in the front row. Anne Jackson recited the poem "Concerning the Infanticide, Marie Farrar," like a sanctimonious Alexander's counter-girl; and acted the scene from *The Good Woman of Setzuan* as if to prove she had mastered the mechanics of the Actor's Studio technique of eating an imaginary stolen cherry, if not the harder task of being infused with joy at the realization that she is to bring a new human being into the world.

### "Speak the Speech, I Pray You"

When Eric Bentley brought his version of *A Man's A Man* to New York in 1962, in competition with the Living Theatre production, his ads ran: "This One The Better of the Two. . ."<sup>19</sup> Nowhere was indication given of the fact that there was no valid basis for comparison, since

one was a straight dramatization of Brecht's definitive and authorized text translated by Gerhard Nellhaus, while the other was an unauthorized adaptation based upon an earlier version which had fallen into the public domain and which was therefore the only one which Bentley could have used without having to face a lawsuit.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Bentley had added his own carnival-atmosphere, military-recruiting prologue and four of his own songs which were paraphrases or parodies (depending on one's point of view) of Brechtian models. Critics such as Walter Kerr<sup>21</sup> were no doubt correct in finding the Bentley adaptation tougher, tighter, and tangier—as befits a musical comedy approach. It was also more “American” in its use of slang and in its employment of music-hall and circus-barker vulgarity in the prologue. But the question remains: is this what one wants from a Brecht play—particularly when the vulgarity is not presented ironically, but rather, is made to appeal to an audience's burlesque-house mentality?

The rationale offered here is that the play is an “adaptation.” Certainly, it is valid to stress the different aspects of a play—which results in different styles and thematic emphases. A good or great play has a profound range of levels and depths, of which different ones can be stressed in different eras, yet without doing violence to its essential dynamics. *Hamlet*, produced over the centuries, is a case in point. But the bowdlerized productions of *Hamlet* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot properly be called Shakespeare. Certainly too, it is valid to adapt a play so as to create from it an essentially new work of

art. Shakespeare did this much of the time. And of course, Brecht did so himself when he based his *Threepenny Opera* on John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. More recently, Sartre's film version of *The Crucible* became an artistic entity different from Arthur Miller's play. But if one makes an adaptation that is significantly different from the original, yet unable to stand as a separate entity, why tout it as the genuine thing?

Harold Clurman provided the rationalization: “Since Brecht himself was an inveterate adapter who altered his texts from production to production, Bentley in his adaptation is following the master's tradition.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly, it is Mr. Bentley's privilege to claim Brecht as his muse if he so wishes. He has indeed chosen a fine master to imitate. However, he has no justification for claiming to be Brecht's muse, or for putting forth this adaptation as authentic Brecht. Why pass off in the master's name the pale scribblings of the disciple?

### Critical Crabbing

Critics and interpreters provide various rationales for avoiding a confrontation with Brecht's essential content:

(1) The assurance that it won't hurt to see a play with radical political content: the political aspect doesn't come off for one reason or another; one can expose oneself without being affected. “It's fun, anyway.”

(2) Projecting onto the author a reason for not comprehending the play: he was psychologically mixed up and didn't know what he was doing; thus, there is no need for us to find any meaning in the play. This can be

coupled with the evaluation, particularly in regard to Brecht's early works such as *In the Jungle of Cities*, that it is a chaotic play written in Brecht's nihilist "stage." It follows then, that since the play is nihilistic, it can have no meaning: make of it what you will, it nevertheless has some good poetry and interesting scenes. The anarchy here is in the critic's undisciplined response rather than in the play itself. Elsewhere, I have taken issue with this mode of response set by Eric Bentley and Martin Esslin.<sup>23</sup> Recently, Messrs. Bentley and Esslin, apparently realizing that the market for Brecht no longer is among the middle-aged liberals of the 1950's to whom apologies had to be made for Brecht's radical stance, have become more aware of the social content of these early plays,<sup>24</sup> and have articulated a somewhat patronizing deference to the young New Left of the 1960's—who are not "afraid of communism, as their seniors were ten years ago,"<sup>25</sup> and among whom the present and future market for Brecht is to be found.

(3) The smug assertion that the political content of the drama is not relevant or is no longer relevant to present-day reality. Of the Hamburg Opera Company's revival of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, London correspondent Peter Heyworth relates that young people distributed "leaflets that attacked the revolutionary Brecht. But they might have spared themselves the effort, for the audience of solid Hamburg burghers found nothing in it to affront them." He goes on to claim that "Today, it is Weill's music that enables 'Mahagonny' to live. For all its verbal brilliance, Brecht's libretto, writ-

ten when he was still a young man and before his political ideas had stabilized, is incoherent and unpersuasive as a criticism of capitalist society, and even Marxist commentators have written severely of it."<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, David Drew found fault not with Brecht but with the musical and dramatic execution of that same production, regarding it as "symptomatic of a deeper failure of sympathy":

This is the crux of the problem for the West, where it is a patriotic or psychological necessity to maintain that the libretto is a period-piece, and that consequently there is no possible connection between the false paradise of materialism as represented by the City of Mahagonny, and, for instance, the *Wirtschaftswunder* which is West Germany.

If the music of *Mahagonny* is only surface parody without real content, and if the libretto is only period high-jinks without contemporary relevance, what is to be made of the work? Why, of course, a fairy tale about American guys and dolls, grown fashionably sick! No real purpose, no attack: just "entertainment."<sup>27</sup>

(4) The solid burghers' response that the society criticized is not theirs—it's the other guy's, and therefore socially irrelevant to them—represents the mechanism of turning a thematic point on its head. Germans can thus regard *Mahagonny* as an imaginative fantasy about America, while Americans can judge it as not literally representing America, and as originating from a German milieu which has nothing to do with us. Surely, the Elizabethan and Jacobean playgoers were less studiously naive about

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the theatrical device of achieving distance and therefore insight into the underlying dynamics of their society by setting the drama in a far-off land, not to mention the non-existent sea coast of Bohemia.

Another example of the ingenious manner in which Brecht is turned against himself is the way in which commentators on *Man Is Man* used the Cold War term "brainwashing," which has the connotation of nefarious techniques used by Chinese Communists.<sup>28</sup> It didn't seem to occur to them that the drama might have something to do with imperialism—with a Western, industrialized, capitalist society based upon war economies and colonialism and producing racism, mechanized dehumanization, and the disinheritation of men. And yet, the dynamics of capitalist expansion still seem to apply, despite the change in specifics. But it would seem that the process of turning South Vietnamese soldiers into human fighting machines to defend an unpopular and corrupt dictatorship is not as successful as the transformation of the day laborer Galy Gay into a human fighting machine for the imperialism of an earlier and perhaps more romantic age of Her Majesty's Army.

(5) Subjecting the author to pseudo-Freudian psychoanalysis, while vulgarly equating the author's psyche with that of the protagonist of his play. The point of view of the play is made to seem a specific outgrowth of the peculiar quirks of the author's psyche, thereby denigrating the objective strength of Brecht's social criticism. This approach was most favored by Martin Esslin<sup>29</sup> who regarded Brecht's early and later plays in terms of the conflict be-

tween the nihilist seeking discipline vs. the disciplinarian finding sublimation in Communism. Thus, the early plays of Brecht are regarded as neither containing nor reflecting valid insights into society; they are merely praised for their "ecstatic anarchic poetry,"<sup>30</sup> whereas Brecht's outrage against social injustice is relegated to the realm of masochistic subjectivity:

Perhaps it is fortunate that psychological interpretations are taboo in the Communist world. Otherwise the authorities might have been more eager to suppress the two poems quoted above ["Auslassungen eines Märtyrers," "Lied Von Meiner Mutter"] . . . with their revelation, in my view, of some of the roots of Brecht's yearning for Communist discipline, his constant preoccupation with the punishment to be meted out to those who indulge their instincts—than the harmless poem about the Red Army Soldier.<sup>31</sup>

Mr. Esslin seems to forget that it was the Nazis who were meting out punishment at the time and who had placed Brecht high on their list of those to be exterminated.

Psychoanalyzing the author through his work represents an inverted approach to the output of an artist such as Brecht, and is found to cripple the interpretations of even such an astute theatre *afficionado* as Robert Brustein:

The play [*Man Is Man*] is exceedingly devious, its complexity rooted in the author's ambiguous feelings toward his own demonstration. For Brecht is saying both that the human will is weak and malleable, and that it is savage, brutal, and uncontrolled—that man is forced to conform by a cruel, oppressive society, and that he must conform in order to suppress the

murder in his heart. Brecht's horrified awareness of external and internal anarchy accounts for his rejection of romantic individualism, and it is the subject of all his early, semi-autobiographical work. In *Baal*, for example, he follows the career of a ruthless, bisexual poet who satisfies his instincts without conscience, and finally dies amid offal and urine, declaring that the world is merely "the excrement of God"; in *In the Jungle of Cities*, he shows the awful consequences of maintaining personal opinions, concluding when his rebellious hero repudiates his idealism in order to escape with his "naked life"; and in *Mann Ist Mann*, he rejects altogether the chaos of personal identity, beginning to insist on the complete extinction of the personality. From this, it is only one step either to Communism or to Buddhism; and, as a matter of fact, Brecht commits himself to Communism like a submissive Buddhist monk, trying to lose himself in a process which will satisfy both his impulse to revolt, and his desire to discipline his terrifying aggressive impulses. But no matter how "rational," "scientific," and ideological the surface of his plays becomes, the depths are always rumbling with poetic intensity and neo-romantic horror, and those savage aggressions which Brecht could never quite subdue.<sup>32</sup>

Such psychologism buries the inner dynamics of Brecht's drama in a false and fruitless metaphysical vacuum. Nowhere is the work seen as objectively reflecting and relating to the dramatic technique, tone, and temper of the particular historical period, its culture and society. The fact of the matter is that *Baal* was explicitly written as an

answer to Hans Jost's romantic expressionist play, *The Loner*. The conflicts and predicaments created by the specific social organization at a particular point in time are reduced from the realm of social phenomena to that of individual psychic peculiarities. But art, no matter how personal the roots from which it springs, is, after all, a social phenomenon. It is particularly ironic that Brecht, who committed his life work to creating a theater of characters, situations, and relationships that were "socio-historically significant,"<sup>33</sup> should be the victim of such metaphysical ahistoricism.

To comprehend the relevancy of Brecht's drama to our present culture, it is necessary for the critic to penetrate beyond such extemporizing on too literally taken plot levels, and to render the underlying dynamics of those still pertinent truths of social psychology against the backdrop of the conflicts in the era when they were engendered.

Unlike today, the European drama of the twenties was avant-garde in the full sense of the term. The ideological framework of industrial bourgeois complacency, nationalism, sentimentalism, and laissez-faire optimism, was belied by the horrors inflicted upon individuals in the first of the great capitalist wars. Inflation was rampant; the social organization was obviously unstable despite the euphoria: everything was permitted. It was the social chaos that preceded and precipitated individual chaos. Men of sensibility were in revolt against the myth of the nation-state, of a place for everyone in this best of all possible social organizations. The individual's alienation from an integrated

and fulfilling place in society was clear and present. In literature, the theater and the arts, experimental forms—attesting to the anguish of man in modern, industrial, capitalist society—mirrored, indicted, and lashed out against the bourgeois lie that had caused the death and dislocation of so many talented and innocent people. Men, women, and children had suffered and died in vain. The only honorable stance possible against the perpetuation of the bourgeois myth was that of rebellion, rejection, and the attempt to shock people out of this most dangerous complacency.

To say “no” to an inhuman social anarchy masquerading as absolute laws of social organization was a moral stand. Rebellion against, and rejection of, such chaotic values, was a pointed nihilism. The First World War had proved that the human will was “weak and malleable,” and that it could be “savage, brutal, and uncontrolled.” But men like Brecht did not condone the conditions by which “man is forced to conform by a cruel, oppressive society.” Rather, they illustrated the methods by which this was accomplished—as a means of unmasking them. And it was not so much that man “must conform in order to suppress the murder in his heart”; rather it was a protest against the fact that man, in order to survive, was forced by the society to suppress his humanity and to take murder into his heart. Furthermore, Brecht illustrated that it was bootless to attempt to transcend the hypocritically concealed, and spirit-deadening bourgeois social anarchy by means of the anarchy of a self-defined code of romantic individualism, when the only way to achieve such tran-

scendence is through those very social mechanisms and milieu against which one is rebelling.

This is the lesson of *Baal*, and even more so of *In the Jungle of Cities*. But there is a progression between the two plays. Baal chose the path of the troubadour of an earlier age rather than allow himself to become the pampered pet of businessmen devoid of any feeling for life. Retaining complete social and geographic mobility by refusing to let his poetry be used as a commodity, he strove insatiably for an epic sweep of experience, unconfined and undiminished by the rules and regulations of a lesser and spiritually emaciated industrial age in which all sense of community had been lost. If man no longer had a genuine place in the social community, then the anarchic individual would refuse to take any place prescribed by a society which enslaved. Baal thus attempted to deny all community, all need of others, all imposed codes and mores which he felt to be patently hypocritical. His consciousness is that of total awareness, total rebellion, total negation of all that binds. Furthermore, it is a consciousness that must not let itself be entrapped, that must always retain its committed refusal to give in to a world that is “the excrement of God.” Like Camus’ Caligula, who, finding all human and social constructs to be fundamentally absurd in the face of the “benign indifference of the universe,” and who consequently wills to settle for nothing less than the impossible, the moon, Baal will give himself over to a communion with nothing less than the open sky.

Through the attempted transcendence of such an in-



verted idealism, man tries to become God, aspires to make the world follow the course of his own will and appetite. And it is here that Baal fails. The social forces and brutality of a world out of control that Baal personally rejects, to which he refuses to be malleable, nevertheless exist objectively. Ultimately, the world is not malleable by him; it cannot be made to conform to the force of his own will. Nothing but defeat lies in trying to replace a social mode of chaos with an individual mode of chaos. But it is the defeat of a man of great anti-heroic proportions. If he cannot become God, he can still go down as naysaying man, as Baal, hurling his execrations against the world which he refuses to accept even when destroyed by the attempt to impose his will upon it.

A society in which everything is permitted still prescribes what it will allow to be permitted. If it institutionalizes inhumanity and lawlessness, these then become laws—which the individual as individual cannot overstep. The instinctual lawlessness of the individual threatens the institutionalized lawlessness of the society—and thus the individual must be destroyed. (For example, the demise of Jimmy Mahoney in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.)

Garga, of *In the Jungle of Cities*, differs from Baal in that he has at the outset a compromised idealism and a compromised awareness and rejection of the savage, competitive forces in society. Displaced from the previous mythical community of his earlier life on the prairie, now merely getting by in an alien jungle of a city, he accepts the modest place forced upon him by the social organiza-

tion. Hoping he can thus be left alone and untouched by the forces swirling about him, Garga nurses the few ideals he can have of maintaining his personal opinions while coming into conflict with no one, and not bucking the pre-ordained society. He accepts and makes do with the fact that he is a poor clerk, that he lives "on rice and fish," that his family "that came from the prairies . . . sleeps three in a bed next to a broken drain pipe." That he smokes at night so he can "get to sleep." That "the windows are shut because Chicago is cold." That "we spend Sundays together. A bottle of whiskey costs eighty cents, no more, no less than eighty cents." (Scene 1.)

It is only when Garga takes up the gratuitous challenge by Shlink that he is catapulted into conflict in the social arena, which requires that he employ with a vengeance the social forces of brutality. But it is not that he "repudiates his idealism in order to escape with his 'naked life.'" For, his idealism, from the very start, had been untested and therefore untenable. And, ironically enough, Shlink, the other protagonist, has engaged him in this conflict in order to achieve a human contact, a warmth and sense of self profoundly engaged with another through battle, since the savage, chaotic, capitalist social order allows no other way for man to find his community among men. But Garga refuses to recognize any humanizing element in the struggle, and, instead of baring his soul to another, he denudes himself of all spiritual and human values. He wants only his naked life, and the naked force and brutal weapons by which to survive social chaos. His transcendence is neither of self, nor of spirit, nor of the senti-

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ments and principles of an earlier idealism—as was sought by Baal, and as Shlink seeks in another way. Garga seeks no more than a preservation of the body which lives on as brute force. By ultimately forsaking his family, he gives up even the more mundane shreds of community and responsibility. His consciousness comes to be directed only at surviving by the dog-eat-dog social code which he has learned through his conflict with Shlink. He has lost all idealism, and all vestiges of his humanity or sensibility. He survives, free of all human values.

Shlink, unlike Baal, is not in monumental conflict with the world; instead, he attempts to achieve a transcendence and sense of self through monumental conflict with another human being. Whereas Baal ravages men and women sexually, Shlink attempts to do so metaphysically. He thus rids Garga of his idealism in order to act out his own idealism: the achievement of comradeship in a “metaphysical encounter.” (Scene 10.)

In *Mann Ist Mann*, Galy Gay exists in a preconscious state of utter naivete. He has his place—that of a day laborer—and his simple way of life. When hungry, he goes out to get a fish. His personal identity is not questioned; he is simply immersed in a niche in the social order, living through the moments of his habitual and uneventful life. It is only when he comes into contact and gets entangled with the way of life of a more complex social order—that of the conquering imperialist army—that his identity comes into question. Once another set of values is superimposed upon the simple pattern of his previously unquestioned way of life, the accommodating man who can't

say no—a dangerous quality in an exploitative world—is transformed by these forces into a human fighting machine, and thereby loses all of his humanity.

Bloody Five, on the other hand, attempting to retain his individuality, his manhood, but yet in conflict with the disciplines of the anti-human social order, must sacrifice his natural instincts; for there is no natural way in which to fulfill such instincts in the social order in which he wishes to play a role and to transcend in terms of its values—that of being a good killer, a soldier.

Thus, it is the social order of an imperialist organization that calls for the extinction of the personality and of human impulses, if man is to survive by its terms. There can be no accommodation between man's natural impulses and society's unnatural demands. When man comes into conflict with society, and when man accepts the conflict on its irrational and anti-human terms, then it is not he who can transcend or change society, but society which forces him to submit, or which extinguishes those human aspects of his personality and finally transforms him into an instrument of its own controlled and institutionalized irrationality and disorder.

If, in his early plays (such as *Baal*, *Mann Ist Mann*, *Mahagonny*, *In the Jungle of Cities*), Brecht is illustrating the impossibility of the individual maintaining his individuality by transcending an inhuman social order—and the neurotic compulsions of such attempts which allow for no resolution other than defeat of all that is human in man—in the later plays he depicts the impossibility of maintaining one's humanity while submitting to these so-

cial forces (Garga fails truly to transcend but doesn't submit; he manipulates while yet in the power of such forces). Thus the schizophrenia of Galy Gay, who is cut off entirely from his previous personality. Thus too, the schizophrenia of the Good Woman of Setzuan who must utilize an evil self in order to continue doing good; or of Anna-Anna in *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie*; or of Mother Courage who, attempting to survive with her family by being a camp follower of the war, loses all that she was trying to preserve by accepting the rules of the game. No values survive. Merely her resigned physical being.

The romanticism and rigidity rest not with Brecht but with the social psychology of our times, and, unfortunately, with those critics (such as Brustein, Bentley, and Esslin) who entertain "ambiguous feelings" towards Brecht's demonstrations, even going so far as to regard *Mother Courage* as an expression of Brecht's "death-wishing."<sup>34</sup> However, the play is not so much a didactic exposition of the pacifist doctrine that "War is evil," or even "a relentless Marxist indictment of the economic motives behind international aggression."<sup>35</sup> It is less a matter of Marxism than it is of sociology. The play is actually a demonstration that Mother Courage "has learned nothing";<sup>36</sup> that the store of shrewd tricks which the peasant and small tradesman have traditionally used to insure their survival, like the crackpot realism of our present day, is inadequate and outmoded as a means to transcend the upheavals and conflagrations of total warfare.

For Brecht was less concerned with teaching us what to think than he was with illustrating the necessity to think in fresh and meaningful ways commensurate with dealing with the complex social forces that threaten our very lives as well as the fundamental values of human existence. As Karl Mannheim, a leading non-Marxist sociologist and contemporary of Brecht, put it:

It is clearly fallacious to regard reflectiveness—as many romantic thinkers do—as being under all circumstances a life-extinguishing force. On the contrary, in most cases, reflectiveness preserves life by helping us to adjust ourselves to new situations so complex that in them the naive and unreflective man would be utterly at a loss.<sup>37</sup>

By illuminating the dynamics of such complex new situations in all of their subtle variations, Brecht makes it possible to grasp objectively the neurosis and waste of a social organization which allows, necessitates, and in fact, institutionalizes such conflict, such irresolution.<sup>38</sup> And from this springs the conclusion that man must collectively change the social organization in order to make it possible for him to fulfill his human potentialities. One either changes oneself rather than the world, or one changes the world rather than oneself. But, when society has reached the point where to conform means to deny one's own most human instincts, and to adopt a schizophrenic mode of coping with its conflicting platitudes and dicta, then it is a suicide of the spirit not to attempt to change the world. Furthermore, to fail to recognize such a truth about the epoch in which we live in itself represents a neurotic and

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inflexible response to reality which, as happened in Germany in the late twenties, we can afford to ignore only at our own peril.

Brecht tried to create an "objective" theater of learning and choice, to which the spectator would bring a "passionate . . . attitude of criticism,"<sup>39</sup> and where he would see "models of men's life together such as could help the spectator to understand his social environment and both rationally and emotionally to master it."<sup>40</sup> This too, was less a matter of Marxism than of sociology. For, as Mannheim observes of Marxist methodology:

In certain epochs the onward course of events, the sequence of cause and effect, may fit with the scheme, because the mainsprings of the age are technical and economic. But there can be other epochs in which vital changes with powerful repercussions arise in spheres other than that of economic technique, or spring from violent shocks to human consciousness.<sup>41</sup>

If, then, as Eric Bentley contends, "young Americans are attracted by" these early plays ("precisely the Brecht the Communists condemn"), and if Brecht has become for them "a symbol of malaise and rejection here,"<sup>42</sup> is it not because the contradictions of our own age, like those of Germany preceding the economic crisis and political polarization of the late twenties and early thirties, seem at the moment to manifest themselves in psychological and ethical terms? Yet, in this younger generation's idealistic rejection, there is already a polarization occurring in conservative-liberal-left (Goldwater-Peace Corps-Fidelista) affinities.

And if our sixties can be said to correspond to Brecht's twenties, is it not possible that our seventies may correspond to Brecht's thirties? For, the dramatic evolution from Brecht's earlier plays (where the stress is upon psychological conflicts stemming from, and worked out in terms of, the backdrop of the socio-economic environment) to his later plays (where the stress is upon the socio-economic environment that precipitates these psychological conflicts), corresponds and is organically related to those stresses in the different epochs of the objective, historical evolution of modern twentieth century Europe, which these plays both reflect and document.

Situated as he was in a transitional period of moral disintegration and social chaos, it was natural that the documentary emphasis should shift from the existential to the social. Brecht well understood that to write in the tradition of the "eternally human" and "universal situations"<sup>43</sup> of the bourgeois theater of his time, would ultimately result in dispensing a dangerous, narcotic rationalization of fascism.

Instead, Brecht attempted to have his "art try, by its own means . . . to further the great social task of mastering life,"<sup>44</sup> by inculcating a reflective, "historical way" of thinking in humanistic terms of "man as a function of the environment and the environment as a function of man, i.e., the breaking up of the environment into relationships between men."<sup>45</sup> The technique by which he attempted to accomplish this dramaturgically—the "alienation-effect"—is, in this sense, akin to Mannheim's concept of social "distantiation," so necessary to being able to orient

oneself rationally to the changes and complexities of the modern world: "Social 'distantiation' . . . is akin to, but not identical with, 'alienation.' The latter consists in the cooling off of emotional relationships."<sup>46</sup>

If Brecht found it necessary to de-emphasize the emotional and empathetic aspect, it was because he instinctively understood that attempts to achieve the group catharsis of Greek tragedy at a time when, unlike the Aristotelian period, the society shared no authentic, common community goals, but rather, was in a state of fragmentation and decay, would feed the mass psychosis of a fascist exploitation of group emotion. In this regard, Brecht's negative contrasts between Aristotelian and epic drama were references, not to the classical period (for which he had great respect), but rather, to the dangers residing in the utilization of group catharsis in our modern era:

The Aristotelian play is essentially static: its task is to show the world as it is. The learning play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed). It is a common truism among the producers and writers of the former type of play that the audience, once it is in the theater, is not a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob, which must be and can be reached only through its emotions; that it has the mental immaturity and the high emotional suggestibility of a mob. . . . The latter theater holds that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of making judgments even in the theater; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and

believes it wishes to be so regarded.<sup>47</sup>

This dramaturgy does not make use of the "identification" of the spectator with the play, as does the Aristotelian, and has a different point of view also towards other psychological effects a play may have on an audience, as, for example, towards the "catharsis." Catharsis is not the main object of this dramaturgy.

It does not make the hero the victim of an inevitable fate, nor does it wish to make the spectator the victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience in the theater. In fact, it has as a purpose the "teaching" to the spectator a certain quite practical attitude; we have to make it possible for him to take a critical attitude while he is in the theater (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely "entangled" in what is going on).<sup>48</sup>

Despite the anachronistic nature of his critique of Aristotelian theater, Brecht instinctively understood what Nietzsche had failed to understand: that one cannot impose an idealized Greek community that connotes consistent and universally held group values, upon a totally different historical and socio-economic organization characterized by conflict and the fragmentation of all community values. For it is the specific social organization which will corrupt the idealized goal and which will alter it into something grotesque and contrary, rather than be redeemed by it. And so long as society is undergoing the process of upheaval and transition, no genuine psychic community is possible. In such times, the truly democratic alternative to politically manipulated mass psychosis can-

not be the group catharsis of Greek drama, but rather, a drama which inspires critical awareness through the media of a socially objectified demonstration of the conflicts, alternatives, and choices open to us.

In this respect, the essential value and significance of Brecht's drama is not that he is radical in a politically proselytizing way, but rather that he has succeeded in demonstrating in aesthetic terms an existential concern for the individual, which has been integrated with sociologically scientific insight into the roots of the fundamental contradictions and pressures of modern society and history. Therefore, in order to comprehend fully his drama, and indeed the artistic output of our period, it is necessary for the critic of culture also to display a more scientific and sociological attitude. It can be said that to understand the total dramatic output of Brecht is to understand the main currents of contemporary drama. For example, Brecht's *Didactic Play of Baden* makes its point about the lack of human community through a clown show which foreshadows the drama of Beckett and Ionesco.

Consequently, it is witless for critics like Kenneth Tynan to champion Brecht and to berate playwrights like Ionesco for not being sufficiently socially oriented.<sup>49</sup> Instead of standing pat on falsely created dichotomies and hurling invectives, denunciations, and dicta against the other "camp"—which serves only to make a mystique of Brecht's epic theater techniques—it would be more fruitful for socially-minded critics to attempt to develop a methodology by which to analyze the nature, emphases, and proportions of existential, social, and universal elements in

the dramaturgy of our times, their inter-relationships and the relationship of each to style and form.

Brecht would be a good starting point precisely because his works contain an interweaving of styles, paralleling the emphases of the epochs of contemporary history, and because in his dramatic technique we find heightened to the level of consciousness, the main aspects of the new drama. It is especially important since so many current and young playwrights in the Western world as well as in Latin America are being influenced by Brecht's dramaturgy—often in terms of the superficial mechanics rather than in regard to the internal philosophical and socio-historic dynamics of his plays.

To understand these dynamics, we can perhaps begin by applying Mannheim's concept of "the three strata of meaning"<sup>50</sup> in a work of art: (1) objective meaning—corresponding to the explicit plot line or visual contours of the work; (2) expressive meaning—corresponding to emotional and psychic content conveyed by the gestic; (3) "documentary or evidential meaning"—corresponding to "the essential nature, the 'ethos' of the subject," that which is "culturally characteristic," the "extra-psychic element," "the 'spirit' of his epoch," which, in the past, has rarely been a matter of fully conscious articulation on the part of the artist.

It is clear that in attempting to create a new theater of critical awareness and distanciation, Brecht has raised each of these strata to an intentional theoretical level so as to create a controlled and unified effect.<sup>51</sup> All three levels have been consciously infused with the intention to de-

monstrate rather than render relationships and situations of socio-historic significance.<sup>52</sup> Thus, on the objective plot level, Brecht plays down suspense and concentrates not upon the "what" that is to happen, but rather, upon the "why" and the "how" of it in terms of the social processes at work.<sup>53</sup> This is re-enforced on the expressive level by the gestures of the actors<sup>54</sup> and by the gestic, under-scoring nature of the music,<sup>55</sup> which further counterpoints and objectifies the socially typical and relevant modes in the psychic content of the responses of individuals to interpersonal and social situations. Finally, the documentary stratum, that which is typical of the *Weltanschauung* of the era, usually embedded in the work of art on a non-reflective level, is presented by Brecht as a deliberate and articulated element of the overall meaning of the drama, as a socio-historical observation.<sup>56</sup>

The relationship between the plays of Brecht's earlier and later periods can be regarded in terms of a progression from the expressive level to a conscious use of the documentary level. By thus objectifying the theoretical meaning of direct experience, Brecht attempted to clarify the underlying causes of the conflicts between the individual and society. Such use of the sociological imagination, so long as it functions on the three levels of meaning, remains an artistic *Gestalt* of the human condition rather than merely a didactic theorem of political action. The work of art thus performs a radical function not in terms of indoctrinating people to a point of view preparatory to their embarking upon a specific political program, but rather in providing vital insights into the nature of

human reality. The work of art is radical insofar as it renews consciousness of one's existential reality and contributes to a milieu where genuine alternatives are available, so as to provide a comprehension of, and a basis for, healthy and meaningful choices that are both personal and social.

It can be seen, then, that the difference between Brecht's dramaturgy and that of a playwright like Ionesco, is not so much a matter of presence or absence of socially significant content, but rather of stress and articulation, of which stratum of meaning is emphasized and thereby informed with its suitable stylistic underpinning. For Ionesco, as well as for Beckett and Genet, it would be the expressive, psychic level utilizing poetic image, symbol, and metaphor, which informs the documentary level; whereas, for playwrights of the naturalistic school, it would be the objective level that would be most stressed. Strindberg can be said to have moved from the objective to the expressive levels. However, most playwrights work in combinations: O'Neill conveying the psychological level through the objective, Ibsen conveying the documentary level through the objective. Each mode of mixing and combining proportions of these strata has its own aesthetic validity. Each has its own socially valid mode of conveying enlightenment as to the human condition embedded in the ethos of different socio-historic periods.

It remains the responsibility of the individual spectator today, aided by the critic, to bring an informed awareness to all modes of dramatic and artistic output. For it is in the thinking person's mind that these three strata must



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ultimately be comprehended, so that art may be allowed to perform its inherent function of generating a creative experience for the individual and the social unit. It is important that we understand the culture of our times and where each of us stands in relation—often contrapuntal—to these complex moments in history in which we are immersed and which art most comprehensively manifests and, intentionally or not, documents. A community of existential and socio-historic understanding is necessary before we can begin to comprehend the values fundamental to creating a genuine social community of men.

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Because things are as they are, they will not stay as they are.

—Bertolt Brecht