

*The Complete
Brecht Toolkit*

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with Julian Jones



NICK HERN BOOKS
London

www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

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Introduction

I.

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century. He was also a prodigiously talented stage director whose work has had a huge impact on the development of the modern theatre.

His approach is still significant, as the director Peter Brook has acknowledged:

Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts or returns to his statements and achievements.¹

Even in his lifetime, however, Brecht was widely misunderstood. This is partly his own fault: his views were frequently contradictory and he could be wilfully obscure. And he was exceptionally fertile: ‘A man with one theory is lost,’ he joked. ‘He must have several, four, many!’ But it’s above all because his ideas have been so widely appropriated that it’s hard to separate Brecht’s own views from those of his later imitators and interpreters.

The aim of this book is to clear away some of the mystery that surrounds Brecht’s theatre and explain what he was trying to do. If I express impatience with theory, it’s because I subscribe to Brecht’s favourite phrase from Hegel: ‘The truth is concrete.’ And because I know, as a director and teacher, that the best I can offer is rooted in practical experience.

2.

In approaching Brecht, we must be careful to avoid what E.P. Thompson called the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’.² For Brecht’s innovations cannot be understood without a feel – however rudimentary – for the political, social and cultural conditions of his time. We should perhaps bear in mind the following four points:

- Brecht devised his theatrical style as a way of engaging with the world in which he found himself, what he memorably called the ‘dark times’, and we cannot appreciate the first unless we accept its intimate connection with the second.
- Brecht didn’t intend his work to be applicable at all times and places, and refused to set in stone things that were intended to be provisional, and so it’s essential that we approach his work historically, as the product of a particular time and place.
- Brecht experimented with many different voices – sometimes mischievous, at other times provocative, and frequently ironic – and it’s a mistake to look for a definitive statement of his views; instead, we should assemble our insights from as wide a range of sources as possible.
- Brecht emphasised change, above all: not just the political change that he wanted to bring about, but the great tides of change that make up human history. The world – and the theatre – has changed enormously in the half-century since his death, and any modern understanding of his work must embrace that fact.

In other words, if we are to understand Brecht’s theatre, we need to engage with Brecht’s unique personality and the very different world in which it emerged. To do anything else would be thoroughly un-Brechtian.

3.

This book was conceived as a partner to the excellent *Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*.³ But the two figures make uneasy bed-fellows. Stanislavsky was a theatre artist, teacher and director, concerned, above all, to make acting a more truthful reflection of observable reality. Brecht, by contrast, was a highly political figure dedicated to creating a kind of theatre that could engage audiences in a critical dialogue about society. Stanislavsky was interested in the theatre; for Brecht, the world beyond the stage door came first.

Sadly, Brecht is often sloppily taught, and his self-conscious style is regarded as theatricality for its own sake. Indeed, his contemporaries criticised him for the same ‘formalism’: an interest in art for its formal properties and not for its success in depicting human experience. But Brecht was forthright about the relationship between the stage and the world:

The modern theatre mustn't be judged by its success in satisfying the audience's habits but by its success in transforming them. It needs to be questioned not about its degree of conformity with the ‘eternal laws of the theatre’ but about its ability to master the rules governing the great social processes of our age; not about whether it manages to interest the spectator in buying a ticket – i.e. in the theatre itself – but about whether it manages to interest him in the world.⁴

In other words, like Hamlet, Brecht didn't just want his theatre to ‘hold the mirror up to nature’, he insisted that it should ‘show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’.⁵ Adapting a famous phrase from Karl Marx, he declared that ‘the theatre has hitherto interpreted the world, the point is to change it’,⁶ and this central imperative (‘Change the world, it needs it!’⁷) runs through all of his work.

Brecht set out his astonishingly ambitious intentions in his twenties:

It is understood that the *radical transformation of the theatre* can't be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time.⁸

And so our exploration of Brecht's theatrical techniques needs to recognise, above all, the relationship between theatrical form and the rapidly changing world beyond.

4.

Brecht can be daunting. At its best, however, his theatre is based on tremendous simplicity: not a simplicity that fails to tell the truth, but an approach to theatre – and writing – that expresses what really matters:

And I always thought: the very simplest words
Must be enough. When I say what things are like
Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.
That you'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself
Surely you see that.⁹

With its passion and its rage, its confidence and its scepticism, its elegance and its concision, this last poem is a guiding light for anyone interested in the challenge that Brecht sets us. It should be pinned up in any room where his fascinating, challenging and occasionally bewildering theatre is being explored.

In Context

BRECHT: A LIFE IN THEATRE

‘**M**ay you live in interesting times,’¹ runs the ancient Chinese curse. Brecht’s life coincides with the most ‘interesting’ half-century in European history and a series of linked catastrophes – the Great War, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism, the Second World War and the division of Germany – shaped his writing in ways that are unimaginable to ‘those born later’.²

Brecht’s story has been frequently told, sometimes at length, in several critical studies and biographies.³ These usually focus on his development as a dramatist, poet and political thinker – with his colourful private life making an occasional appearance⁴ – but with little insight into his practical work in the theatre, or the evolution of his theatrical theory.⁵ What follows, then, is an attempt to chart Brecht’s development into the most influential stage director and theatrical innovator of the twentieth century.

Bavaria: 1898–1923

Brecht was born into a middle-class family in the sleepy Bavarian city of Augsburg. He spent much of his youth in an apolitical reverie, chasing girls, writing Expressionist poetry, running a puppet theatre and entertaining his friends by gruffly singing songs to a guitar. He attended a decent school, studied medicine in nearby Munich, and worked for a short while as a hospital orderly in the chaos following Germany’s surrender in the First World War.

In Theory

WHY THEORY?

This book has been written for those many young actors, directors and writers who are drawn to Brecht's theatre and want to take up the 'Brecht challenge' into the twenty-first century. I'm aware that they may feel daunted by the extensive theory that confronts the student of Brecht, and my aim in this chapter is to clarify what he meant by the key terms. If I quote from the theory at length it's because I think we should read what Brecht actually wrote. In the rest of the book I will show how they can be taught and put into practice.

How to Approach It

But why is there so much theory and how should we approach it? First, we should recognise the intellectual nature of the German theatre. Even today German directors and playwrights are expected to describe their theoretical approach in detail, and the result is still highly conceptual. This contrasts with the commercial bias of the British theatre, which sets out, above all, to entertain, and where theories about writing, acting or the art of theatre are regarded with deep suspicion. There are many reasons for this – innate commercialism, the anti-intellectualism of British culture and a blithe assumption about the superiority of our theatre's way of working – but it can make Brecht's theory puzzling to the British reader.

And then, we need to take Brecht's theory with a bucketful of salt: apparently, when asked whether an English production

In Practice

ACTING

The word ‘Brechtian’ has so often been used as an excuse for bad acting that I thought it might be useful to describe some of the things that Brechtian acting *isn’t*, as a way of approaching (dialectically, of course) a better understanding of what it *is*. In brief, then, Brechtian acting shouldn’t be:

- *Caricatured* Because of the tag ‘political’, it’s sometimes thought that in Brechtian acting the working class should all be played as saints, the middle class self-satisfied, and the rulers monstrous. In fact, Brecht’s fascination with contradiction means that Brechtian acting explores the different layers of human behaviour and shows how it’s possible to be *both* a heroic scientist *and* a coward (Galileo), a victim of war *and* someone who lives off its proceeds (Mother Courage), a kindly aristocrat *and* a vicious landlord (Puntila), a friend of the poor *and* a judge with little respect for justice (Azdak). Brecht’s realism precludes any possibility of caricature.
- *Long-winded* Brecht’s emphasis on clarity and precision, as well as his insistence on social detail, has sometimes led actors to perform the plays in a ponderous fashion, over-deliberate and slow. Instead, Brecht expected his actors to act with lightness, quick-wittedness and a sense of pleasure in showing how the