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Thomas K. Brown

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## "VERFREMDUNG" IN ACTION AT THE BERLINER ENSEMBLE

THOMAS K. BROWN

Few coinages have been so generally misunderstood, at home and abroad, as Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung*. Brecht himself felt again and again obliged to warn against misinterpretations; and foreigners are additionally hampered by the difficulty of adequate translation: "estrangement, alienation or disillusion in English; *dépayement*, *étrangement* or *distançiation* in French: a wide choice of equivalents, none of which is exactly right."<sup>1</sup> Yet in his numerous illustrations and explanations, Brecht makes his meaning unmistakable. Three of his clearest definitions are the following:

Einen Vorgang oder einen Charakter verfremden heißt zunächst einfach, dem Vorgang oder dem Charakter das Selbstverständliche, Bekannte, Einleuchtende zu nehmen und über ihn Staunen und Neugierde zu erzeugen.<sup>2</sup>

Eine verfremdende Abbildung ist eine solche, die den Gegenstand zwar erkennen, ihn aber doch zugleich fremd erscheinen läßt.<sup>3</sup>

Der V-Effekt besteht darin, daß das Ding, das zum Verständnis gebracht, auf welches das Augenmerk gelenkt werden soll, aus einem gewöhnlichen, bekannten, unmittelbar vorliegenden Ding zu einem besonderen, auffälligen, unerwarteten Ding gemacht wird.<sup>4</sup>

*Verfremdung* has been treated as a difficult and *avant-garde* concept, but the idea is not at all obscure or revolutionary; it has, indeed, been common property since the middle of the eighteenth century. Thus Johann Jakob Breitinger in his *Kritische Dichtkunst* of 1740: "Das Wunderbare [the equivalent of Brecht's *das Verfremdete*] (legt) den Schein der Wahrheit und Möglichkeit ab und nimmt einen unbetrüglichen Schein des Falschen und Widersprechenden an sich; es verkleidet die Wahrheit in eine ganz fremde, aber durchsichtige Maske." Later in the same essay he describes the function of art: "gemeinen Dingen das Ansehen der Neuheit zu geben."

A generation or two later, the Romantics made the idea their own. Novalis phrased it in *Fragment* 3053: "Die Kunst, auf eine angenehme Art zu befremden, einen Gegenstand fremd zu machen und doch bekannt und anziehend, das ist die romantische Poetik." Coleridge defined imagination as follows: "This power . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: . . . the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar

objects."<sup>5</sup> Shelley said almost the same: "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar."<sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer found in this faculty the source of all original thought: "Um originelle, außerordentliche, vielleicht gar unsterbliche Gedanken zu haben, ist es hinreichend, sich der Welt und den Dingen auf einige Augenblicke so gänzlich zu entfremden, daß Einem die allgewöhnlichsten Gegenstände und Vorgänge als völlig neu und unbekannt erscheinen, als wodurch eben ihr wahres Wesen sich aufschließt."<sup>7</sup> Robert Browning in 1855 put the thought in the mouth of Fra Lippo Lippi:

We're made so that we love  
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see . . .  
 . . . Art was given for that.

T. S. Eliot was well acquainted with the idea, which he found exemplified in Andrew Marvell: "In the verses of Marvell . . . there is the making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, which Coleridge attributed to good poetry."<sup>8</sup> He also makes a general statement on the subject: "Poetry . . . may help to break the conventional modes of perception and valuation . . . and make people see the world afresh."<sup>9</sup> And even Ionesco, who openly disapproves of Brecht, has concepts of theater closely resembling Brecht's: "Pour s'arracher au quotidien, à l'habitude, à la paresse mentale qui nous cache l'étrangeté du monde, il faut recevoir comme un véritable coup de matraque. Sans une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit, sans une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée, de la réalité existentielle, il n'y a pas de théâtre, il n'y a pas d'art non plus; il faut réaliser une sorte de dislocation du réel, qui doit précéder sa réintégration."<sup>10</sup>

So Brecht may have encountered what he came to call *Verfremdung* in the normal pursuit of his interest in poetry and the theater; and by 1940, at least, he was aware that the concept enjoyed wide currency. Thus we read in his *Arbeitsjournal* entry of August 2, 1940: "der V-effekt ist ein altes kunstmittel, bekannt aus der komödie, gewissen zweigen der volkskunst und der praxis des asiatischen theaters."<sup>11</sup> As to where he found the word itself, it is now almost certain that this happened on his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935, when he became acquainted with Russian Formalism through Tretyakov; for the concept of "priyom ostranneniya," "the device of making it strange," looms large in the esthetic theory of the Formalists.<sup>12</sup> Bernhard Reich has given us a description of how Brecht turned this phrase into German:

So sehe ich mich aufs neue in eines der dunklen Zimmer Tretjakows in der Spiridonowka versetzt. Ich saß dort zusammen mit Tretjakow und Brecht, der hier logierte. Wir sprachen über eine ganz außergewöhnliche Theaterleistung. . . . Ich bezog mich auf ein Aufführungsdetail, als Tretjakow präzisierete: “Ja, das ist eine Verfremdung,” und dabei warf er Brecht einen Verschwörerblick zu. Brecht nickte. Das war das erste Mal, daß ich die Vokabel “Verfremdung” kennenlernte. Ich muß also annehmen, daß Tretjakow Brecht diese Terminologie zutrug; ich denke, daß Tretjakow die schon von Schklowski formulierte Terminologie “ottschuschdenie,” “disanzieren,” “abstoßen,” etwas umbildete.<sup>13</sup>

Brecht now substituted *Verfremdung* for the term “epic theater,” which he had taken over from Erwin Piscator. “‘Verfremdung’ and ‘Episierung’ seem to have been used by him to mean exactly the same thing. But it [Verfremdung] gave a rational basis to conclusions at which he had already arrived.”<sup>14</sup> In 1929, Piscator described the impetus behind epic theater: “Aus dem Schau-Spiel entstand das Lehrstück . . . Nichts durfte unklar, zweideutig und somit wirkungslos bleiben, überall mußte die politische Beziehung zum Tage hergestellt werden . . . Die Aufgabe des revolutionären Theaters besteht darin, die Wirklichkeit zum Ausgangspunkt zu nehmen, die gesellschaftliche Diskrepanz zu einem Element der Anklage, des Umsturzes und der Neuordnung zu steigern.”<sup>15</sup> Brecht’s formulations sound almost like paraphrases of Piscator, whose importance to him he freely acknowledged. “Das menschliche Verhalten wird als veränderlich gezeigt, der Mensch als abhängig von gewissen ökonomisch-politischen Verhältnissen und zugleich als fähig, sie zu verändern . . . Der Zuschauer soll also in der Lage sein, Vergleiche anzustellen, was die menschlichen Verhaltensweisen anbetrifft.”<sup>16</sup> For Brecht, as for Piscator, the insights in question will be Marxist, and the better order will be Communist. The spectator “muß mit dem Urteil dazwischen kommen können”;<sup>17</sup> and not only the spectator, but the actor also, who must guard against immersing himself in his role à la Stanislavsky, at the expense of a clear understanding of the socio-politico-economic realities. He must maintain his objectivity, so that he may “demonstrate” (*zeigen*) the role to the spectator,<sup>18</sup> and through the role the issues at stake. So energetic was Brecht’s espousal of these doctrines that by 1927 the sociologist, Fritz Sternberg, was hailing him as the very incarnation of epic theater; and, as late as 1943, Brecht finds it worthy of mention in his journal that Tsiang, a Chinese author and actor visiting Hollywood, “begrüßt mich feierlich als den ‘founder of the epic theater.’”<sup>19</sup>

In a great number of critical writings, Brecht explains the techniques and devices by which the actor and the stage manager can perfect themselves in the craft of *Verfremdung*. In the years since his death, his tradition has been carried on by a group of disciples utterly dedicated to his ideas, which have taken on the quality of dogmatic truth, and a body of exegesis has been written on how the Master's theories have been translated into theater reality.

But the question can legitimately be asked: how many of the stated objectives of Brecht's *Verfremdung* are actually perceived as such by the ordinary spectator at the Berliner Ensemble, or anywhere else for that matter? Are the practitioners achieving the desired results? Is the audience getting the message? Does it notice the cases where the directors and actors have taken special pains to apply a Brechtian principle? Is it, in fact, aware at all that a special theatrical technique has been used on it?

These questions are not asked in the writings of Brecht's disciples, who simply assume the affirmative answers. When Käthe Rüllicke-Weiler gives her work on Brecht's dramaturgy the subtitle, "Theater als Mittel der Veränderung,"<sup>20</sup> she is enunciating an article of faith, not a proposition to be examined. When Joachim Müller defines *Verfremdung*, he takes over an entire vocabulary with all its underlying assumptions:

Bei Brecht dient die Verfremdung gerade dazu, dem Menschen seine durch die Kapitalisierung der Gesellschaft bewirkte Selbstentfremdung bewußt zu machen, damit er sie durch kritisches Denken und aktives Eingreifen aufhebt, indem er die bestehende Gesellschaftsordnung radikal verändert.<sup>21</sup>

When Werner Hecht picks up a list that Brecht made of "einige Eigenarten des Berliner Ensembles, die mitunter Befremden erregen,"<sup>22</sup> he rephrases it as a statement of what the Berliner Ensemble actually *accomplishes*:

1. Wir stellen die Gesellschaft als veränderbar dar.
2. Wir stellen die menschliche Natur als veränderbar dar.
3. Wir stellen die menschliche Natur dar als abhängig von der Klassenzugehörigkeit.
4. Wir stellen die Konflikte als gesellschaftliche Konflikte dar.
5. Wir stellen Charaktere mit echten Widersprüchen dar.
6. Wir stellen die Entwicklung von Charakteren, Zuständen und Ereignissen als "diskontinuierlich" dar.
7. Wir versuchen, die dialektische Betrachtungsweise zum Vergnügen zu machen.<sup>23</sup>

Under each of these headings, Hecht cites illustrative examples from their productions of Brecht's plays. Not all of them are convincing; more to the point, one is simply not aware while watching the plays, except on the rarest occasions, that one is seeing a presentation of an alterable world with alterable people in it who are the product of their class, full of real contradictions, and so forth. Reading Hecht, one has the clear impression of reading not objective analysis, but partisan pleading; reading Müller's statement (above), one seems to find oneself in a world of pure make-believe.

In search of direct and practical insight into this curious phenomenon, the writer of this paper attempted to find out,<sup>24</sup> through interviews with some of the prominent members of the Berliner Ensemble, what *they* thought they were conveying on the stage, and specifically how they were putting into execution Brecht's various suggestions for actors and directors. Of course, all who work at the Ensemble are loyal to Brecht and what he stands for; but among them are some whose dedication to his principles is exceptional, and these are the true Brechtianer. As of the summer of 1972, they were: among the producers and directors, Werner Hecht and Wolfgang Pitzka; among the assistants, Jürgen Kern, Günter Schmidt, and Hein Trilling; among the actors and actresses, Heinrich Buttchereit, Carl Heinz Choynski, Christine Gloger, Annemone Haase, Hans-Peter Reinecke, Felicitas Ritsch, and Ekkehard Schall; among the stage designers, Karl von Appen, Theo Otto, and Andreas Reinhardt.

Of the actors, Ekkehard Schall is the Brechtianer *par excellence*. With the Ensemble since 1951 and *Nationalpreisträger*, he plays more leading roles than anyone else, *i.a.*, Arturo Ui, Coriolan, Barberini, Sullivan Slift (in *Johanna*), Shlink, Woyzeck. In his writings he emphasizes how Brecht's theories and orientation give the actor a deeper insight into his art and a greater awareness of the social realities:

Brecht hat den schauspielerischen Beruf in vielfacher Hinsicht erweitert. Im alten Theater lernten wir Stücklesen, den Sinn der Sätze verstehen, leidenschaftlich sein, sprechen und spielen. Brecht erweckte unser Interesse, die Literatur zu lesen, die das Stück mit seinem Zeitalter verbindet und die Literatur der aktuellen Bezüge. Brecht brachte uns bei, den Sinn der Sätze der Verhaltensweise der Figur unterzuordnen, die der Schauspieler genau zu bestimmen hat; wir lernten den möglichen Widerspruch zwischen menschlichem Verhalten und menschlicher Aussage.<sup>25</sup>

Schall's acting is stylized to the point of idiosyncrasy; he is engaged in *Verfremdung* all the time he is on the stage. In doing this he makes empathy impossible: the audience is in no danger of losing itself in the characters he creates, and thus having its critical judgment impaired. At the same time it is perplexed by what often appears to be caricature. This is well enough in *Arturo Ui*, and even in *Im Dickicht*, which does not seem to make much sense under the best of circumstances; but what is one to make of Coriolan, who is surely intended to be taken seriously? Erich Engel, whose association with Brecht goes back to June, 1922, wrote a letter to Schall criticizing his portrayal of Andreas (*Leben des Galilei*) in 1960:

Die von Ihnen versuchte Stilisierung geht meiner Meinung nach einen prinzipiell falschen Weg. Sie wollen durch Besonderheit etwas auffällig machen, aber diese Verfremdung dient *nicht* dem einzigen Zweck, dem eine Verfremdung zu dienen hat, nämlich dem, auf wichtige Wesenszüge besonders energisch aufmerksam zu machen. Hier wird verfremdet 'an sich.' Ihre Verfremdung dient nicht irgendeiner Erkenntnis und Einsicht, folglich wirkt sie als eine subjektive Gewolltheit einer objektiven Erkenntnis und Einsicht sogar entgegen.<sup>26</sup>

As of 1972, Schall was not heeding this advice.

In "Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringt,"<sup>27</sup> Brecht suggests a number of techniques by which the actor can school himself in *Verfremdung*, and he made use of them repeatedly in rehearsals that he directed: having the actor speak his lines in indirect discourse ("He said . . .") and in the past tense; having him speak the stage directions out loud, or describe what he is doing; translating verse into vulgar prose, and prose into some local dialect. Schall finds these devices extremely useful, even as an experienced actor: they guard him against too smooth a delivery and give him greater insight into the implications and significance of his lines. Schall also has words of praise for the "parallel" and "interpolated" scenes that Brecht wrote—and often used in rehearsals—to throw a new light on certain scenes from Shakespeare and Schiller.<sup>28</sup> They too, he feels, reveal to the actor socially significant aspects of those scenes that he would otherwise have overlooked, and thus deepen his awareness. Whether, in his opinion, this insight was communicated to the audience—whether a spectator could feel the difference, for example, between an actor who had used these rehearsal techniques and one who had not—this, he granted with a smile, would probably not be the case.<sup>29</sup>

In his writings on the theater, Brecht makes many statements regarding the effect that the actor should be able to have on the spectator. Some of Brecht's demands seem literally impossible of execution, and as a spectator the writer was unable to perceive that any of them were actually being realized. He therefore quoted some of the relevant passages to Schall and asked how he put them into practice. For example, Brecht asserts:

Geht er [der Schauspieler] auf die Bühne, so wird er bei allen wesentlichen Stellen zu dem, was er macht, noch etwas ausfindig, namhaft und ahnbar machen, was er nicht macht; das heißt, er spielt so, daß man die Alternative möglichst deutlich sieht, so, daß sein Spiel noch die anderen Möglichkeiten ahnen läßt, nur eine der möglichen Varianten darstellt. . . . Das, was er *nicht* macht, muß in dem enthalten und aufgehoben sein, was er macht. . . . Der technische Ausdruck für diese Verfahren heißt: *Fixieren des Nicht-Sondern*.<sup>30</sup>

This would appear, on the face of it, to be a difficult feat; and it must be mentioned that rehearsals at the Berliner Ensemble, where the minutest gestures are practiced until they are just right, provide not the slightest evidence that this goal is being pursued. Furthermore, no spectator of the finished production could guess that this was what he was watching. When Schall was asked how such an effect might be produced, he was unable to say more than that he was aware, while acting, of the *Nicht-Sondern*, and hoped that the audience was also.

In another passage Brecht states:

Nehmen wir an, die Figur sagt etwas, was sie wahr glaubt. Der Schauspieler kann ausdrücken, muß ausdrücken können, daß es unwahr ist.<sup>31</sup>

Schall was asked how the actor might express this. He replied that it could be shown by the whole characterization that the actor had built up. If the character has been portrayed as a person of no insight or intelligence, like, for example, the theologians and other ecclesiastics in the fourth and sixth scenes of *Galilei*, then the very fact that he holds something to be true is reason enough to doubt it. But the lack of insight and intelligence in such a character is conveyed primarily not by the actor's portrayal but by the author's lines.

One of Brecht's firmest beliefs was that the actor should "demonstrate" a role, not identify with it, and that this directly served the purpose of stimulating the spectator's critical intelligence:

Da er [der Schauspieler] sich mit der Person, die er darstellt, nicht identifiziert, kann er ihr gegenüber einen bestimmten Standpunkt wählen, seine Meinung über sie verraten, den Zuschauer, der auch seinerseits nicht eingeladen wurde, sich zu identifizieren, zur Kritik der dargestellten Person auffordern.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the actor must be able to demonstrate that he is demonstrating: "Es tritt nur einer auf und zeigt etwas in aller Öffentlichkeit, *auch das Zeigen*."<sup>33</sup> When Schall was asked how one conveyed *das Zeigen des Zeigens*, the example he chose clarified an incident that the writer had experienced two nights before during Schall's performance in *Coriolan*, when it had seemed that Schall had forgotten his lines. He now explained the event as his means of reminding the audience that what he was doing on the stage was a demonstration: for just a moment the actor steps out of character, turns into his ordinary self. Here again, the attempt to follow Brecht's admonition is merely confusing. Schall, more than any other actor at the Ensemble, embodies Willett's opinion that "*Verfremdung* . . . opens the way to pure freakishness of a distracting kind."<sup>34</sup>

Hans-Peter Reinicke is one of the younger actors at the Ensemble. He, too, endeavors to demonstrate the characters he is playing. In *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* he plays Pedro Jaqueras, Teresa's brother, a worker. When asked for an example of *das Zeigen* in his performance, he referred to a speech that he has rather early in the play: "Ich weiß nicht, was heute geschah. Gestern nacht hielten wir uns noch." His reading of the line, however, is: "Gestern nacht hielten wir uns—*noch!*"; and this emphasis, he explained, has the effect of transforming this statement, which might have been treated merely as a piece of information, into a sort of confrontation, to make clear the intensity of his feelings about the war. Unfortunately, the spectator, even if he is on the alert for this line, barely notices it, and certainly does not attach to it its intended meaning.

Among the directors at the Berliner Ensemble, Wolfgang Pintzka is the most active and prominent of the Brechtianer. He, too, makes a conscious effort to implement Brecht's ideas. Here is how, for example, he describes why he made certain changes in his production of the *Dreigroschenoper*:

(Wir versuchten) eine Verschärfung der Satire auf die Lebensverfälschungen im Kapitalismus. Wir stellten die Jahrmarktsbude im Soho-Prolog und das Panoptikum im Finale—die Moritat von Mackie Messer, von Peachum und von Tiger-Brown

—unter das “Aushängeschild” “Wunder des Abendlands.” . . . Wir spitzten die Kämpfe—“Jeder gegen jeden”—zwischen Macheath und Peachum und zwischen Peachum und Brown zu, aber auch innerhalb der Gangsterbande differenzierten wir noch mehr—so wird zum Beispiel Münz-Matthias bei der Geschäftsübergabe Mackie Messers an Polly ganz und gar von seinen “Freunden” verraten und verkauft. Heute, wo in einem Teil der Welt diese Grundhaltung noch prinzipiell möglich—und nötig ist, wo die großen und kleinen Räuber “friedliche Nachbarn” sind, hat eine *Dreigroschenoper*-Inszenierung eben in der Betonung und Entlarvung dieser Lebensnormen hochaktuelle Bedeutung.<sup>35</sup>

Praiseworthy as it may be to expose the life norms under capitalism, it must be doubted whether the audience got the point of the exposed legend or derived any political wisdom from the spectacle of criminals betraying each other.

Pintzka also explains his motive for one feature of his production of *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*: “Der Gefahr einer gemütlichen, zu harmlosen Schweyk-Aufführung versuchten wir entgegenzuwirken, indem wir die Bedrohung der tschechischen Patrioten durch die faschistische Umwelt in Prag mit einem ganz kleinen, an eine ‘Zelle’ erinnernden ‘Kelch’ deutlich machten.”<sup>36</sup> Since there were no visual props to suggest a prison cell, one must doubt whether the audience had any feeling at all about the size of the room.

In his production of *Pauken und Trompeten*, Pintzka aimed at exposing social contradictions:

Bei aller gebührenden Wahrung der Komödie, der Liebesgeschichte im Stück, deckten wir gerade hier die gesellschaftlichen Widersprüche auf—konfrontierten wir die Interessenten am Geschäft mit einem ‘patriotischen’ Krieg deutlich mit den wahren Patrioten Englands. In einer Zeit, wo amerikanische Soldaten als eine Art Kolonialarmee in Vietnam die Freiheit zu unterdrücken versuchen, sollte das Spiel um das Geschäft des ‘guten König George,’ der vor zweihundert Jahren um seine Kolonien in Nordamerika bangte, beunruhigen.<sup>37</sup>

But few of the spectators at this comedy will see the connection between it and Vietnam.

The writer asked Pintzka his views on some specific matters of technique. A summary of the questions and his responses follows:

Could he offer an example of “demonstrating,” from the director’s point of view? Yes: the scene from the *Dreigroschenoper* in which Mackie and Polly are to be married in a vacant stable. In order

to demonstrate the contradiction between the locale and the ceremony, Pintzka has Münz-Matthias dust off, as a place for Mackie to sit, an old crate that has been sprinkled with talcum. A great cloud of dust arises, and the audience laughs. (Query: Is this anything more than a nice piece of stage business in a situation that is clear enough already?)

How does he achieve *das Zeigen des Zeigens*? In hundreds of ways: for example, the actor winks at the audience or gets the same effect by gesture.

How does he get an actor to show the untruth of what the character in the play believes to be true? By an exaggerated delivery of the lines in question, or by making the character so obviously unworthy of respect that his words are automatically discounted.

How can a critical awareness of political and social contradictions be communicated to an audience in such plays as *Johanna* and *Der Brotladen*, in which the picture of capitalism is such a caricature, and the behavior of the characters so unbelievable, that they simply cannot be taken seriously? Admittedly, Pintzka said, the portrayal of capitalism in these plays, and of colonialism in *Mann ist Mann*, is too "simple"; but there the plays are, and you do what you can. *Turandot*, Brecht's last play, is much better in this regard.

How can a director implement Brecht's recommendations in "Die Straßenszene,"<sup>38</sup> in which the actor is urged to conduct himself as the witness to a traffic accident might when demonstrating to a crowd of passers-by what has taken place? (The witness merely shows what happened; he does not identify himself with any of the principals; he is not an "artist"; his demonstration is also a commentary and it has a practical purpose, with practical consequences; he sticks to the specific incident and does not try to generalize.) Pintzka praised this essay as one of Brecht's most lucid expositions of what he meant by *Episierung* and *Verfremdung*; but when he was pinned down as to *precisely how* an actor might incorporate these suggestions into his acting, his elaborations amounted simply to an endorsement of underplaying. He was asked why, in view of the implications of the "Straßenszene," so much attention was paid at the Berliner Ensemble to the matter of type-casting. He had no convincing answer to this question.

Werner Hecht, another prominent director, in his essay "Entwicklung der Zuschaukunst," explains how the repertoire is chosen to meet

“die Bedürfnisse des Publikums”: “Mit ‘Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder’ kam nach dem Krieg zuerst ein Stück auf die Bühne, das das Publikum zu Bemühungen um den Frieden anregte. Die Unbelehrbarkeit der Courage provozierte die, die den Krieg soeben überstanden hatten, zum Lernen.”<sup>39</sup> This is a typical triumph of dogma over fact. It is notorious that audiences learn nothing from *Courage* except what they know already, that war is hell and the little man has no choice but to slug his way through as best he can. Brecht intended Mother Courage to be odious; but the more odious he made her, the more pathos she took on; and the closer the spectators have been to war, the more they admire her. Ekkehard Schall reported<sup>40</sup> that when the Poles stage this play, Mother Courage is the great heroine: millions more would have died had it not been for people like her. Whatever the audiences are “learning,” it is not what Brecht intended and not what Hecht seems to think they are learning.

In the case of *Die Mutter*, as it happens, we have the actual report of an ideal Ensemble spectator: Hans Garbe, a mason honored by the East German government as *Held der Arbeit* and *Nationalpreisträger*. One of Brecht’s uncompleted projects was to write a play about him. After seeing *Die Mutter*, he wrote his impressions of it. What he notices most is the similarity between the conditions portrayed in the play and those he knew as a child. Regarding the production as such, he mentions only his appreciation of the visible legends and his recognition of the tendentious nature of the work:

Ich begreife, was die wollen: Zum Sozialismus kommen. Aber ich begreife viel schneller, wenn ich das zuerst lese. Durch die Texte auf dem Vorhang erinnere ich mich auch: Das habe ich da gelernt, auf der Parteischule oder in einer Versammlung.<sup>41</sup>

And he concludes: “Wenn ich aus reinem Herzen sagen soll: ich habe bei dem Stück nicht ans Theater gedacht, ich habe nur an meine Vergangenheit gedacht.”<sup>42</sup> This would appear to be precisely the sort of empathy, *Einfühlung*, that Brecht objected to so strenuously throughout most of his life.

To sum up: all true Brechtianer have a tendency to equate the effort with the achievement; that is, they assume in most cases that what they are trying to express in their productions of Brecht’s plays is actually perceived in its intended meaning by the audience. Again and again, however, the disinterested observer, comparing their stated intentions with what appears on the stage, must conclude that the intentions are not being realized. As is so often the case with Brecht, the theory seems to bear little relation to the theatrical practice. As

the writer ascertained in numerous informal interviews with audiences at Berliner Ensemble performances, during intermissions and after the plays, people simply are not affected in the ways that the theory demands, nor are the actors and directors achieving the results they claim. The Brechtianer at the Berliner Ensemble, indeed, are not unlike a dedicated priesthood that practices its rituals in the total conviction of their efficacy, but without noticeable influence on the rainfall.

This is not altogether their fault. For one thing, East German audiences are peculiarly lethargic, and Brecht never found the audience of "Kinder des wissenschaftlichen Zeitalters" that he was looking for. On a more essential level, it is the author, not the actors or directors, who must take the blame for any difficulties encountered in practicing *Verfremdung* on an East German stage; for, as Reinhold Grimm points out, there is an irreconcilable conflict between *Verfremdung* and ideology:

Das Prinzip der Verfremdung sprengt aber zwangsläufig die Ideologie überhaupt. . . . Produktiver Zweifel und dialektische Bewegung bilden also ihr philosophisches Grundprinzip. Die Folgerung, die sich daraus ergibt, liegt auf der Hand: Brechts marxistische Theorie der Verfremdung kann im Grunde niemals treu ideologisch-dogmatisch sein. . . . Dieser fundamentale Widerspruch . . . war von allem Anfang an, sozusagen per definitionem, in dem Begriff der Verfremdung gegeben.<sup>43</sup>

Small wonder, in view of this, that individual efforts at *Verfremdung* miss their mark. Finally, all of Brecht's plays were written in a spirit of opposition to the prevailing order. Although much of Brecht's criticism, as it happens, has legitimate targets in East German society, it is a fact, as Walter Hinck points out, that "das eigentliche Publikum Brechts ein Publikum in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft ist."<sup>44</sup> The criticism is more or less out of place in the East German world; and this truth is particularly glaring in essential matters. Consider, for instance, the crucial idea of providing critical insights into the way things are, so that one is inspired to go out and make changes for the better. The fact is, of course, that audiences exposed to Brechtian *Verfremdung* do not go out and start revolutions; they most certainly do not do so in East Germany; and, for that matter, the whole idea of changing society from the ground up, which plays such a very large part in Brecht's thinking, is incongruous and futile in an East Berlin theater, before an East German audience, and from the pen of a man who did not wish to see that system fundamentally changed.

But the pursuit of *Verfremdung* at the Berliner Ensemble succeeds even as it fails. For there can be no doubt that the Berliner Ensemble is one of the great repertory theaters of the world; and this is due not merely to its being exempt from the pressure of the profit motive, so that it can spend prodigal amounts of time on rehearsals. It is due primarily to the staff's zestful allegiance to Brecht's ideas. Their pursuit of these ideas, even though they delude themselves as to how well they achieve them, leads them to one brilliant theatrical inspiration after another. It causes Pintzka to sprinkle the talc on the crate in the *Dreigroschenoper*; it causes Martin Flörchinger as Schweyk, when he is arrested by the SS-man, Bullinger, to say to him as he is being led out, “Folgen Sie mir unauffällig”;<sup>45</sup> it causes Helene Weigel, when at the end of *Courage* she is paying the peasants to bury Kattrin, to take back one of the coins. It leads, in short, to marvelously entertaining theater; and Brecht himself recognized, at the end of his life, that entertainment is what theater is about.

*Howard University*

- <sup>1</sup> John Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 177.
- <sup>2</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke. Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), XV, 301 (from “Über experimentelles Theater”). Hereinafter citations from this edition = *W*.
- <sup>3</sup> *W*, XVI, 680 (from “Kleines Organon für das Theater,” §42).
- <sup>4</sup> *W*, XV, 355 (from “Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst”).
- <sup>5</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Ch. 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (written 1821, publ. 1840).
- <sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer's *sämtliche Werke*, hrg. von Julius Frauenstädt (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1919), VI, 81 (from “Parerga und Paralipomena”).
- <sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), p. 259.
- <sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 155.
- <sup>10</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 60.
- <sup>11</sup> Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 137.
- <sup>12</sup> The definitive work on this subject is Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism. History—Doctrine* (s-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1955). Cf. particularly Ch. 10, 14, and 15. Erlich summarizes the Formalist positions as follows: “Rather than translating the unfamiliar into the terms of the familiar, the poetic image ‘makes

- strange' the habitual by presenting it in a novel light, by placing it in an unexpected context." A thorough examination of *Verfremdung* is Reinhold Grimm, *Bertolt Brecht—Die Struktur seines Werkes* (Regensburg: Hans Carl Verlag, 1971).
- <sup>13</sup> Bernhard Reich, *Im Wettlauf mit der Zeit* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1970), p. 371 f.
- <sup>14</sup> Willett, p. 177.
- <sup>15</sup> Erwin Piscator, *Das politische Theater* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1963), pp. 62, 66, 133.
- <sup>16</sup> *W*, XV, 474 f. (from "Über die Verwendung von Musik für ein episches Theater").
- <sup>17</sup> *W*, XVI, 694. T. S. Eliot, in his essay, "‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama," has the same thought: "It is essential that we should preserve our positions of spectators, and observe always from the outside, though with complete understanding."
- <sup>18</sup> It is interesting that Diderot, with whom Brecht was very familiar, devotes a large part of his *Paradoxe sur le comédien* to the argument that the actor who can demonstrate emotions is greatly superior to the actor who is expressing what he actually feels.
- <sup>19</sup> *Arbeitsjournal*, p. 582.
- <sup>20</sup> Käthe Rüllicke-Weiler, *Die Dramaturgie Brechts. Theater als Mittel der Veränderung* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1966).
- <sup>21</sup> Joachim Müller, "Dramatisches, episches und dialektisches Theater"; in *Episches Theater*, hrg. von Reinhold Grimm (Berlin: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1966), p. 194.
- <sup>22</sup> *W*, XVI, 724-726.
- <sup>23</sup> Werner Hecht, *Aufsätze über Brecht* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1970), pp. 82-88 (from "Theaterarbeit am Berliner Ensemble").
- <sup>24</sup> Under a grant from Howard University.
- <sup>25</sup> Ekkehard Schall, "Der Schauspieler in der Brecht-Inszenierung," *Die Weltbühne* (East Berlin), May 18, 1971, p. 614.
- <sup>26</sup> Erich Engel, *Über Theater und Film* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1971), p. 100.
- <sup>27</sup> *W*, XV, 341-357.
- <sup>28</sup> Brecht, *Versuche*, Heft 11 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951). These scenes are described and discussed by Hecht (*op. cit.*, pp. 64-67).
- <sup>29</sup> The interviews with Schall and the others were conducted in the *Kantine* of the Berliner Ensemble, and a word of appreciation should be said not only for the management's hospitable toleration of such visitations, but also for the unfailing courtesy and cooperation of those interviewed.
- <sup>30</sup> *W*, XV, 343 (from "Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst," as are the next three citations).
- <sup>31</sup> p. 352.
- <sup>32</sup> p. 346.
- <sup>33</sup> p. 349.
- <sup>34</sup> Willett, p. 186.

- <sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Pintzka und Manfred Grund, “Das Modell als Vor-Bild,” *Theater in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, April 31, 1967), unpaginated.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> *W*, XVI, 546-558.
- <sup>39</sup> Hecht, p. 92.
- <sup>40</sup> In an interview with the writer. He mentioned also that the Poles could not make Arturo Ui ridiculous; in fact, they retitled the play, “Der *unaufhaltsame* Aufstieg des Arturo Ui.”
- <sup>41</sup> “Hans Garbe über die Produktion,” *Theaterarbeit*, hrg. von dem Berliner Ensemble (Dresden: VVV Dresdner Verlag, 1952), p. 169.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- <sup>43</sup> Reinhold Grimm, *Strukturen. Essays zur deutschen Literatur* (Göttingen: Sachse und Pohl Verlag, 1963), p. 224.
- <sup>44</sup> Walter Hinck, “Die Dramaturgie des späten Brecht,” in Grimm, *Episches Theater*, p. 342.
- <sup>45</sup> This is what German plainclothes police tell a person whom they are arresting. As spoken here by the culprit, in an East German theater, the line invariably brings down the house.