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Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a German poet, playwright and theatre director. This project will look at the development of Brecht's playwriting over time in response to the socio-political changes in Berlin, by evaluating Brecht's work in the three periods of different political environments that Brecht was exposed to in Berlin. These should reveal how historical context and political stance shaped his work. Some reference will be made to the plays mentioned, due to their content and the different times in which they were written. Academic and contemporary responses mentioned in this project were mostly acquired at the Brecht Haus archive in Berlin on 14th February 2008. During the First World War, Brecht doubted in a school essay whether it was honourable to die for your nation and this feeling was heightened when he had to serve in the war as a medical orderly in 1918 (Rosenhaft, 1994). His first plays were written as the war ended; the working title of one of his first was Spartakus (later published as Drums of the Night), after the organisation of the German revolutionaries Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Brecht's radical side is clear in his early plays; he talks about the decay and corruption of the bourgeois society that he felt a part of (Meech, 1994). Yet arguably at this point in time, Brecht was "a bohemian rather than a Marxist" (Schoeps, 1992). The polarisation of the Weimar Republic and the rise of fascism that resulted in stronger political beliefs and works in the late 1920s (Fetscher, 1980). Saint Joan of the Stockyards, an allegory on the workings of the stock exchange, is an example of this (McCullough, 1994). The Weimar Republic saw the increasing commercialisation of leisure activity with the rise of popular entertainment (cinema, sports, dance, jazz, etc) (Rosenhaft, 1994). The educated, bourgeois audience was being replaced by a broader audience. This cultural democratisation affected the

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role of the writer (Silberman, 1993). Some traditionalists sought new ways of asserting their elitism whilst others like Brecht began to develop a habit of production that submerged the author's subjectivity within a collective (Meech, 1994) as seen with the adaptations of Marlowe's *Life of Edward the Second* (1924) and *Man Equals Man* (1926). The notion of aesthetic activity as production rather than creation, theorised by Brecht in his essay *The Threepenny Lawsuit* (1932) indicates this shift. Social changes have therefore directly impacted Brecht's style of writing and theoretical concepts of theatre. Brecht was taught Marxism in the late 1920s twenties by Korsch and Benjamin, both anti-Stalinists (Esslin, 1959). Brecht supported the KPD, a mass party that to him seemed the only force capable of confronting Hitler, unlike the main Trotskyist organisation in Berlin with only 50 members (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). He would not have had much opportunity to influence events otherwise. Brecht's turn to Marxism changed his approach to theatre. He rejected the naturalistic style that presented the audience with a perfect illusion of reality. For productions of *Drums of the Night*, he suggested hanging a banner above the stage saying "Don't Stare So Romantically!" Ironically, the need for a new form of theatre became obvious to him after his biggest financial success. *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) illustrated begging as an organised trade, with criminals working hand in glove with the police. But rather than shocking bourgeois audiences, the play was a huge success (Schmidt, 1992). Audiences loved music, while Brecht's critique of capitalism did not attract much attention. Brecht was involved in the conflicts at the end of the Weimar Republic. One month after the premiere of *The Mother* (1932), police ordered that the play could be recited but not played. The production of another play was stopped because Nazis

were assaulting the actors (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). Brecht's vision of a more humane society changed with the rise of fascism (Silberman, 1993). He usually failed to represent convincingly the alternative order that could confront fascism, as seen in *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938), *The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar* (1938-39), and *the Book of Changes* (1935-42). As a Marxist, when the Nazis gained power, Brecht went into exile, staying close to the German border in Denmark and Finland to support the anti-fascist struggle until the war forced him to leave for the USA (1941). Until the end of WWII, Brecht's plays rarely reached the stage. Yet the plays written in exile are his most famous today. Brecht expressed opposition to National Socialist and Fascist movements in *Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. *Mother Courage*, for example, is torn between protecting her children from the war and making a profit out of the Thirty Years War (Leach, 1994). Key themes in the play include war as business, virtue in wartime and morality. None of those plays put simple answers to the moral questions they raise, and none of them are simple propaganda pieces. Rather, they show how the possibilities of the individual characters are limited by social conditions, and they force the viewer to think about the limits of "common sense" moral judgements (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). Brecht focused on new representation. On the one hand, the formal reductionism of the parable plays from this period seems to function as a kind of protective shield against the impossible contradictions of reality, but on the other, the shift in subject and technique to more deliberate forms of distancing de-centres the text-audience relation by transferring the utopian imagination into the spectators themselves (Silberman, 1993). The prologue

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to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944) suggests the political and poetic utopia Brecht envisioned in his mature plays. Brecht's invitation to return to the GDR, enticed by offer of own theatre and company, shows that although Brecht was not a member of the Communist Party, his allegiances were sincere (Esslin, 1959). The impressive Berliner Ensemble, visited on 15th February 2008, solely for the use of Brecht's work and directing, and his work still dominates the theatre today (fieldtrip, 2008). He spent his last years defining and reworking his ideas. Although towards the end of his life Brecht wrote few plays, some famous poems have emerged from after the Second World War (Rundell, 1980). *The Solution* was Brecht's commentary on uprising (1953) the GDR; he supported government measures taken to crush the uprising, including the use of Soviet military force, despite his concern for the protesting people as well. His allegiance to the communist regime is portrayed in *The Days of the Commune*, which is based on the proletariat revolution of the Paris Commune in 1871, which attempted to bring about a revolution through the working class. Brecht is often criticised for returning to the GDR (Fetscher, 1980). In fact, exile gave Brecht first-hand experience of the 'freedom' of the West. He was blacklisted - out of 40 scripts he wrote, one was accepted for filming, and this was cut severely by Hollywood that Brecht withdrew it. Brecht's commitments were leftist enough to provoke HUAC's investigation in 1947 and the refusal of visas for travel to West Germany under US control (Kruger, 2004). Brecht also came into conflict with the Stalinist cultural bureaucracy. They forced him to make changes in several productions and even stopped two of them (Esslin, 1959). Brecht received support for his theatre in East Germany but he expressed private reservations about SED policy, especially after the workers' uprising

on 17 June 1953 challenged the party's claim to lead a "workers' and peasants' state" (Kruger, 2004). Brecht's relation to the GDR regime remained contradictory. On the one hand, he said it would be better to have a bad socialism than to have none, he also disliked the dictatorship. When the Berlin workers uprising (1953) was repressed, he wrote a letter to the general secretary of the Communist Party in which he called for dialogue (Esslin, 1959). Only his last sentence backing the government was published. His call for dialogue, I believe, had two aims. Firstly, to reinstate peace amongst the campaigning people, as it seems unlikely Brecht would have spoken publicly against the GDR regime, despite his dissatisfaction with the scenario. Secondly, because of his pro-GDR regime status and his status as a GDR icon, his words would be more trusted by both parties. There is much argument over Brecht's true thoughts regarding the 1953 uprising. In private, Brecht was more outspoken. In his unpublished poem *The Solution*, he ironically asks, "If the people had forfeited the confidence of the government, would it not be easier to dissolve the people and elect another?" Brecht intended his theatre to be a critique of society, believing that theatre's function was to educate, and to achieve this he created his epic theatre theory. "A play should not cause the spectator to emotionally identify with the action before him or her, but should instead provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view of the actions on the stage". Brecht wanted audiences to use critical perspective to identify social ills and therefore effect change, having described his plays as a collective political meeting in which the audience is to participate actively (Brooker, 1994). For this purpose, Brecht employed the use of techniques that remind spectators the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself called the

alienation effect (Esslin, 1959). To achieve this, he ripped up the traditional five act structure of static drama. Inspired by Russian revolutionary theatre, he looked for ways to interrupt the main plot (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). For example, he used comments on the action directed to the audience, songs in between and projections of text with extra information. To undermine the natural curiosity of the audience, he used an announcer to summarise the scene before it was shown. This allowed him to show that the course of events is not simply given, and therefore demands choices and active intervention. The political side of his plays became harder to ignore. A good example is *The Mother*, which is set during the Russian 1905 revolution, showing a mother who wants to free her Bolshevik son from jail – and how by doing so she gradually becomes convinced of Communism herself (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). Brecht chose historical settings as another means of creating a distance between the viewer and the play. In *Galileo Galilei*, the struggle between the scientist and the Catholic Church served as the scene for a debate on the tensions between individual beliefs and the way our rulers try to control our thoughts (Weber, 1980). Brecht's work has attracted immense controversy since his early theatrical successes in the 1920s, having been compared to Shakespeare (Laughton); Brecht is considered one of the great playwrights and directors of the 20th century. Over 50 years after his death, his plays – along with those of Chekhov – are the most frequently performed works (Fuegi, 1995). As Brook has emphasised: “Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts or returns to his statements and achievement”. But much praise for his ability and work is usually held up because of his Marxist views. This political allegiance has annoyed some critics like Willet, who has

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chosen to look upon it as something unfortunate but incidental to his achievements. Bentley also expresses his disappointment: Brecht “ would be a better writer if he gave up Marxism”. Others oppose his work on the grounds that it is propagandistic and lacks the subjective sentiments accessible only through a more personal theatre of individual experience. Inevitably, commentators are forced to approach Brecht by addressing not only his plays but also his writings on theatre as well as the way he directed productions. Mostly they decide to deal with his technical expertise in isolation from his politics (Fuegi, 1995). Brecht is seen as a modern dramatist and poet worthy of careful study, and of no more particular interest except that he also happened to be political (Breuer 1992, Weber 1992). This purposeful attempt to neglect the political Brecht is frustrating because of its success in obscuring the relevance of his achievements, despite his surviving attempts by fascism to destroy its revolutionary content and undermine its significance. Most commentators have failed to understand the rationale of the method involved. But Brecht was quite clear about what he wanted and how he proposed to get it. When he referred to Marx as “ the only audience for my plays that I had come across”, Brecht was describing a primary focus that is lost on his many critics. He did not mean that only Marxists could understand his plays. Rather it was Marxists alone who could understand what he was trying to do. Brecht comprehended how controlling cultural production had become under capitalism. His response was to do something about it by creating a theatre that sought to redefine the relationship between audience and performance (Trommler, 1980). Yet the historical illusions of modernism have become a problem of positioning oneself subjectively in a post-modern age when evaluating the

subject of this study. Brecht was a communist without a party card. He could write only “ on commission from the party,” their precarious status did not hinder him from criticising the policies of the party as well as praising its goals (Volker, 1987). His critiques were never simply blunt attacks, but were handled lightly with wit and satire. However, the party officials did not appreciate his critical irony, but preferred instead the sympathetic tracts of bourgeois authors. Brecht’s communist allegiances have also led to numerous attempts by the mainstream art world to degrade his legacy – either by claiming that his plays are worthless Stalinist propaganda, or by claiming that they are worthwhile despite the politics (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). Yet Brecht’s popularity has depended on misreading since 1928, when “ The Ballad of Mack the Knife” song performed as part of The Threepenny Opera in Berlin became one of the most-recorded standards in the history of pop music. Brecht (and his composer Weill) might have wanted an art that hastens the overthrow of capitalism; instead they got covers from Darin and Sinatra (Tonkin, 2006). Depoliticising Brecht, however, is a difficult job – he wrote plays with titles such as The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie and Days of the Commune, and poems like The Song of the Class Enemy (Windisch & Brandon, 2006). Brecht’s period in exile was a fight against material want, persecution, betrayal, and political disappointment (Volker, 1987). The last years of his life were spent in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), because he wanted “ another Germany” based on the principles of peace and socialism. There, he was able to preserve his independence and artistic integrity. He welcomed the politicisation of art while vigorously defending his work against any state ideology (Volker, 1987). His theatre, the Berliner Ensemble, was opposed to the official GDR

doctrine on art (Socialist Realism) and to the German Stanislavski tradition (naturalism) (Etkind, 1980). On principle, he rejected the use of art and theatre to conform to state requirements of taste. Brecht's main contribution, then, is to be found in the innovative ways he devised for examining history and making the processes of history visible as changeable ones (Trommler, 1980). Brecht's impact is not to be found in any recipes he may have provided but rather in the possibility of his writings to enable our own creativity in thinking about historical truths and processes (Silberman, 1993).