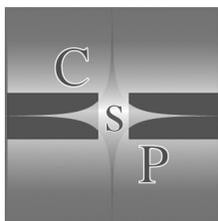


Brecht, Broadway and United States Theatre

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Edited by

J. Chris Westgate



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PREFACE

This book had two beginnings. The first was my growing concern with the ways that Bertolt Brecht's name was being bandied around in theatrical reviews, some of the more egregious examples I discuss during the following introduction. But the trend is much broader than the representative examples included there. Writing about the theater in the United States by the end of the twentieth century, in many cases, had become almost an implicit extension of the Broadway ethos of putting on a good show and not bothering with difficult details of what Brecht might have said—much less what he meant. It was enough to invoke the ghost of Brecht, when Broadway's validity in a world where terrorism could take place in New York City, to make us believe that U.S. theater mattered. The dumbing down of Brecht evident in more and more reviews isn't deliberate (I don't think) but rather demonstrates how little American reviewers and audiences care about what Brecht or any German or foreign (following Eric Bentley's argument) playwright might have to say about the relevance of theater. Eventually, I had read enough of such reviews.

The growing frustration I felt led to the second beginning: chairing a discussion panel at the Pacific and Ancient Modern Language Association (PAMLA) in 2005 at Woodland Hills, California. There, I discovered panelists (one of whom has contributed to this anthology) as well as members of the audience who were equally concerned with the clumsy ways that Brecht was being invoked. But further, there was growing anxiety about the fact that Broadway theater had—in an almost perfect illustration of hegemony—almost become theater in the United States. More and more people growing up in the United States and writing about theater did not have Brecht—or at least the Brecht whose writing about theater was always tinged with revolutionary fervor—as a touchstone for considering serious, political theater. This fact is particularly troubling today when the Bush administration has reinacted the worst dangers of *Mother Courage*, if not *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. This anthology, then, intends to challenge the indifference toward Brecht's writing about theater that has become more and more evident in reviews of theater in and around Broadway. My hope is that it will prompt discussion and debate about the past and the future of theater in the U.S. and elsewhere, an ambition that Brecht surely would have applauded.

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We wish to thank the following people for their commitment and interest in this project, without which it would not have been possible. Thanks to Carl Weber, Sean Carney, and John Rouse, all of whom read and commented on this book in the manuscript stage. Thanks to Pacific & Ancient Modern Language Association that originally hosted the discussion panel on “Brecht and Broadway: A New Century of Political Theater” that gave rise to this anthology; to Amanda Millar at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, who nurtured this manuscript from the beginning. And thanks to Scott Shershow and W. B. Worthen who provided advice and encouragement very early in the process of editing this anthology.

INTRODUCTION

BRECHT ON BROADWAY: A DIALECTICAL HISTORY

J. CHRIS WESTGATE

When Bertolt Brecht left the United States in 1947, bound for what would become the German Democratic Republic (GDR), he had become thoroughly frustrated with Broadway. Broadway theater was mired in anachronism, more like German theater of the 1890s when naturalism and its assumptions about audience identification dominated German stages than the modern theater that had emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. “You have never heard of the new effects,” Brecht told James Schevill the year before returning to Europe, meaning the experimentation with treadmills and film projections (among others) made famous by Erwin Piscator and Brecht himself, “or if you do use them, you use them briefly as tricks.”¹

Implied within this criticism are the problems that Brecht had with The Great White Way while living in the United States from 1941-1947. Relying on the idiom of fourth-wall realism, Broadway theaters—then and now—endorse passivity in audiences watching the story unfold along predictable, even formulaic lines. Never challenged to recognize or reflect on any dissonance within the play’s staging or scenography, nor any dissonance between the representation of the world and the world represented, audiences are instead encouraged to *feel*: first curiosity, followed by anxiety with the mounting complications faced by characters, which gives way to renewed hope and further anxiety with sudden reversals of fate, which finally conclude with triumph if watching comedy or catharsis if watching tragedy. Although Brecht never mentions Broadway in “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (written in the years immediately after leaving the United States), it seems likely that Broadway exerted some influence on his complaints about audiences at

¹ Schevill, “Bertolt Brecht in New York,” 101-102.

the mercy of “vague but profound emotions”—the fundamental problem that his epic theater intended to amend.² Broadway was (and still is) ideologically conservative, implicitly reassuring theatergoers about their commercialized society rather than aggravating them toward new—and Marxist—understanding.

Not surprisingly, Broadway demonstrated confusion about and hostility toward epic theater during the 1930s and 1940s, reactions Brecht experienced firsthand when Theatre Union (not a Broadway theater but nevertheless following Broadway’s idiom of theater) staged *The Mother* in 1935. But Brecht’s verdict on Broadway went beyond frustrations about the difficulty of getting his plays produced the way they were intended. His frustration, evident during the Schevill interview, in fact, probably owed as much to the 1946-1947 Broadway season he attended with Eric Bentley. Many of the plays debuting that year, like N. Richard Nash’s *Second Best Bed*, Albert Mannheimer’s and Frederick Kohner’s *The Bees and the Flowers*, Ruth Gordon’s *Years Ago*, have been forgotten to all save the theater historian. Revivals from this season, like *Hamlet*, *Lady Windemere’s Fan*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, were more recognizable but were no doubt inhibited by the superstructure of commercialized escapism.

How many of these productions Brecht saw was regrettably not recorded in Bentley’s *The Brecht Memoir*, but Brecht’s general reaction was: “On the whole, he was not amused.”³ Brecht’s most specific criticism dealt with Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, though this production was famously flawed, and the play wasn’t staged successfully until a decade later when revived at Circle on the Square—the year of Brecht’s death. “‘If you open a play with the image of a room full of sleeping men,’ said BB, ‘the audience will take the hint.’”⁴ He was troubled by *The Iceman Cometh*’s unwillingness to rouse audiences toward the socialist movement interwoven with much of the early dialogue among Larry Slade, Hugo Kalmar, and Don Parritt and that supplies historical backdrop of Harry Hope’s Saloon. In fact, the ideological conflict between socialism and capitalism becomes secondary to the psychology of disillusionment that refuels the derelicts’ need for their pipe dreams—more existential than political. This was probably another failure on the part of U.S. theater for Brecht, a failure to do more than wring emotions from audiences. If this play was the best that Broadway had to offer, Brecht may have concluded that there was no place for him as

² Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 192.

³ Bentley, *Bentley on Brecht*, 329.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 329.

a dramatist in the U.S., a conclusion confirmed when he was summoned before the HUAC (House UnAmerican Activities Commission) hearings the following year.

If Brecht had lived long enough to consider the history of his plays on Broadway, he would have known that he made the right decision in settling in the GDR. When *Galileo* debuted on December 7, 1947, after Brecht had left the U.S. behind, the play lasted a meager seven nights before closing. This, despite what Carl Weber describes as Brecht's determined efforts in rewriting the play with U.S. audiences in mind⁵ and Charles Laughton giving a strong performance in the leading role. When *Galileo* was revived twenty years later, the more respectable but nonetheless discouraging run opened April 13, 1967 and closed June 17 of the same year. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, which was influenced by U.S. gangster films of the 1930s starring Jimmy Cagney, George Raft, and Edward G. Robinson, and may have been written to introduce Brecht's plays to U.S. audiences,⁶ flopped during its debut run: opening November 11, 1963 and closing November 16, 1963. Revived in 1968, it lasted two weeks before closing. *Mother Courage and Her Children*, considered Brecht's best play after the 1949 production at the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin with Brecht's wife Helene Weigel in the leading role, opened March 28, 1963 and closed May 11, 1963—another failure by Broadway standards. When revived in 1967, it managed a month.

To appreciate just how poorly Brecht's plays have been received on Broadway, we need only put this stage history alongside the 1999 revival of *The Iceman Cometh*, with Kevin Spacey playing Hickey, which ran for 102 performances. Or John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*, which opened March 31, 2005 and, after winning the Pulitzer Prize, ran through July 2, 2006. Why this discrepancy? Broadway follows a time-honored syllogism when it comes to mounting new or revived productions: what sells seats gets staged, and what sells the most seats are dramas that supply enjoyment through identification or musicals that deliver satisfaction through spectacle. *The Threepenny Opera*, of course, is the exception that proves the rule. Unlike other Brecht plays, *Threepenny* has enjoyed a six-year run on Broadway from the middle 1950s through the early 1960s and has been revived at least seven times to date, most recently by the Roundabout Theatre Company in 2006.

The fundamental tensions invoked by Brecht and Broadway when considered today, some seventy years after *The Mother* introduced epic

⁵ Weber, "Is there a Use-value? Brecht on the American Stage at the Turn of the Century."

⁶ Baxandall, "Brecht in America, 1935."

theater to U.S. theaters and audiences, no doubt seem irresolvable. When Broadway producers and owners discuss theater, as they do in Arvid F. Sponberg's *Broadway Talks*, they subsume everything under the discourse of business: they talk about marketing shows, recouping investments, and making profits; and make only uncomfortable mention of innovation or originality. The holy grail sought by producers becomes plainly evident: the extended run playing to sold-out houses like *The Mousetrap*, which, as of 2000, had been playing on London stages for some 20,000 performances. If you stand near the TKTS booth in Times Square, you can almost hear their whispered hopes of returns on investments, like the ghostly voice in *Field of Dreams*.

No wonder that Broadway theaters have historically privileged blockbuster shows: more songs, more dancing, more costumes, more glamour—anything to thumb their noses at Aristotle for relegating “spectacle” to an afterthought in *The Poetics* and to keep the paying public wowed. They intend to fulfill and simultaneously whet the most culinary of appetites of theatergoers with shows like *Wicked* and *The Lion King* and *Spamalot*: not merely to keep us paying increasingly exorbitant ticket prices but also to send us home satisfied with the production, ourselves, and our world. Brecht's dramas were completely foreign, as much conceptually as linguistically, to this kind of theater. Instead of having audiences identify emotionally with characters, Brecht intended them to judge historical or political implications of their actions. Instead of having worldviews confirmed for us while attending theater, he intended us to face epistemological challenge during the play and then undertake sociopolitical change following the play. Contributing to this chasm between Broadway and epic theater is the reality that Brecht intended many of his plays, like *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny*, to confront bourgeois audiences with the banality of their interests and others, like *The Mother* and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, to sow the seeds of revolutionary fervor in worker-audiences. With such divergent ambitions, it would seem there is little to say about Brecht and Broadway beyond the obvious.

But taking Brecht and Broadway as a rigid dichotomy means accepting a particularly unBrechtian (for want of a better word) view of history. Beginning from some endpoint, this kind of thinking reads the history of incidents proceeding that point teleologically: that is, as building steadily and inevitably toward that endpoint. Brooks McNamara's “Broadway: A Theatre Historian's View” demonstrates the implicit danger in this kind of historiography in relation to the commercialism of Broadway. More opinion than history, McNamara's article nevertheless invokes the ethos of

“history” or more accurately “historian” through its title and then suggests the “close attention” Broadway deserves should address the history of the theater district in New York City. Unfortunately, McNamara simultaneously insists upon a fixed definition of Broadway that constrains potential discovery when he contends, “it has always offered commercial theater and always has been devoted to making a profit.”⁷ The “always” here, repeated with the finality of an argument already won, forecloses at least some of the scrutiny called for in McNamara’s essay. The “how” Broadway became wedded to making profits erases the question of “why” it did so, which McNamara rightly links to the geography of Times Square. The historical becomes the inevitable, implying that too common conclusion that Broadway’s commercialism could not have been otherwise. Considered this way, history becomes a closed system, where all events are sedimented into patterns of fossilization that cannot be questioned or challenged. Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* was intended to confront just this kind of thinking: the belief that the rise of Adolf Hitler (to change examples momentarily) could not have been avoided, that the history of post-World War I Germany could not have played out differently. In Brecht’s parody, there is nothing inevitable about the buffoonish Hitler-figure Ui coming to power but rather was a product of the complicity and silence of others. While plainly admonitory in *Arturo Ui*, this view of history is empowering because it posits the possibility of change through action and intervention—if not then, then certainly when and if it were to happen again.⁸

Likewise, nothing was inevitable about Broadway becoming and remaining center of commercialism in the U.S. while Brecht has all but been forgotten on The Great White Way. Brecht himself did not initially surrender to this dichotomy, his frustrations with Broadway toward the end of the 1940s notwithstanding. Between the years 1935 and 1936, he described Berlin, Moscow, and New York as the “‘theater capitals’ that were ‘modern, ie introduced artistic and technical innovations’” to the theater world according to Weber.⁹ Notably, this was after Brecht’s personal and professional frustrations that followed from *The Mother’s* production by Theater Union described by Anne Fletcher in the opening section of this book. Weber additionally observes that *Galileo* and *The*

⁷ McNamara, “Broadway: A Theatre Historian’s Perspective,” 126.

⁸ *Arturo Ui* ends with a warning of just this repetition of history in the epilogue: “The womb he crawled from still is growing strong.” The point for audiences is to recognize how they can intercede in history, which is still unfolding, and confront future tyranny.

⁹ Weber, 227.

Caucasian Chalk Circle were “adapted by Brecht in America for America, with the viewing habits of the Broadway theater public in mind.”¹⁰ While living in the United States during World War II, Brecht made frequent efforts to get his plays produced on Broadway. Ronald Hayman, in fact, locates the exigency of *Chalk Circle* firmly in Broadway’s commercialism: “Brecht started working on the play after Luise Rainer had told him how much the role in Klabund’s version appealed to her. A Broadway backer, Jules Lowenthal, wanted to put on a show for her, and she persuaded him to commission a new adaptation from Brecht.”¹¹

Why did Brecht take this commission? Why did he make what Bentley calls “strenuous efforts” to get Broadway productions of his plays while living in the United States?¹² He may have been trying to make a name for himself at a time when few of his plays had been staged successfully outside of Germany. On the other hand, he may have intended his plays, even softened for Broadway audiences, to make the foundations of commercial theater—among Brecht’s favorite targets—tremble. Whatever the explanation may be, the point for purposes of this anthology is clear: Brecht did not believe the opposition between epic theater and Broadway theater was irresolvable.

Brecht on Broadway

In 1965 Eric Bentley considered the following in a *New York Times* article: Why has Broadway rejected Bertolt Brecht? Intending to challenge the dismissal of Brecht’s dramas by one of the central arbiters of theatrical success in the United States, Bentley maintained that Brecht’s communism and irony (the dark irony of Frank Wedekind or Carl Sternheim rather than the whimsical irony of Oscar Wilde) became blockades to successful productions of *Mother Courage* or *Chalk Circle*. Joseph McCarthy’s “Red Scare” certainly disinclined producers and audiences toward Brecht’s plays, many of which involved overtly Marxist pedagogy, during the 1950s—when there were no New York productions of Brecht plays mounted except for *The Threepenny Opera*. Worth asking then as well as now, Bentley’s question suggests a better methodology for considering the difficult encounters between Brecht and Broadway than the throwing up of hands that usually follows when Brecht and Broadway are included in the same sentence. By addressing cultural causes, Bentley

¹⁰ Ibid., 233.

¹¹ Hayman, *Bertolt Brecht: The Plays*, 81.

¹² Bentley, 252.

foregrounds ways of considering not just why Broadway rejected Brecht but what that rejection demonstrates about the particular assumptions of dramaturgy, performance, and reception in U.S. theater during particular historical moments.

Like Bentley, the contributors to this anthology ground discussion of Brecht's difficult encounters with Broadway in history—a history remarkable for its messy details—rather than inevitability. But it's worth noting that this anthology does not share Bentley's belief that Brecht needs to be exonerated from his Marxism.¹³ In fact, nothing could be further from the ambitions and approach here. More importantly, this study intends to push Bentley's question further to consider the conceptual as well as the cultural differences between Brecht and Broadway. Of particular interest are conflicts about representation in and responsibility of theater. The first includes questions of performance and production (considered by David Kornhaber and Ilka Saal); the second includes the function of theater in relationship to society (considered by Dominic Symonds and William Burling). Brecht's encounters with Broadway during the seventy years leading up to and following Bentley's *New York Times* essay, then, has not yet been sufficiently considered.

More noteworthy are the questions never addressed by Bentley: When and why has Broadway embraced Brecht? While infrequent, Brecht's plays and politics (at least in name) do make it to Broadway stages, usually during some reactionary moment in U.S. history, when Brecht's plays, ironically, become ways of comforting ourselves. *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht's most commonly performed work on Broadway, is the best evidence of this tendency. Although *Threepenny* initially debuted in a botched production in 1933, which suggested that it would fare no better than *Mother Courage* or *Galileo* on Broadway, it received new life when revived shortly after Senator McCarthy's Icarus-like fall from national prominence. In 1954, Marc Blitzstein's "tempered" version, reworked toward entertainment rather than excoriation of bourgeois audiences, won enormous popular success, running for six years and breaking "all records for the run of a musical theatre piece at the time."¹⁴ Brecht's musical, though he would have perhaps disowned this production if he had seen it, served a necessary end: it supplied escapism from politics when the U.S. public had become weary of national debates about democracy and communism.

¹³ Bentley is hardly subtle in this ambition. See *Bentley on Brecht*.

¹⁴ Weber, 228.

This blunted version of *Threepenny* is well known in theater history, but what's hardly considered is how this trend of commodifying Brechtian plays during times of historical or cultural crisis continues half a century later. Not long after the World Trade Center attacks in September of 2001, Benjamin Barber wrote "*Oklahoma!*—How Political is Broadway?" Defending the relevance of Rodger's and Hammerstein's musical, which had been revived on Broadway in 2002, Barber invoked Brecht's *Chalk Circle* as the centerpiece of his argument for U.S. musicals following the terrorist attack. It hardly matters to Barber that *Oklahoma!*'s politics are unabashedly conservative, arguing for reconciliation between isolationists and interventionists during World War II, through the trope of property ownership no less! Or that *Chalk Circle*'s politics are rather radical: Brecht depicts Governor Abashwili and his wife as the epitome of a bloated aristocracy that deserve to be overthrown. What matters after 9/11 was finding a way of making musical theater comforting to audiences, who may have suddenly found themselves doubting the significance of such pastimes, and Brecht's name became a convenient touchstone.

Taking such questions as starting points, this book considers Brecht and Broadway in the tradition of dialecticism. This methodology involves seeking out and investigating the tensions between Brecht and Broadway in U.S. theater history, an approach that corresponds with dialecticism's positing "everything is itself and not itself at the same time, that is, everything is and is becoming, nothing is static or self-contained."¹⁵ This dialectical methodology rejects history as a closed system and welcomes the contradictions of Brecht and Broadway as contributing to U.S. theater. How else to account for the fact that with the exception of Shakespeare and Beckett, Brecht is the most influential dramatist in university classrooms (and many university theaters); but the Broadway that has historically rejected Brecht functions as one of the final arbiters of the canon of dramatic literature published, taught, and studied in universities? How to make sense of the obvious importance of epic theater to playwrights and directors working successfully on Broadway during the 1990s—like Tony Kushner and George C. Wolfe—during a decade when hardly any Brecht plays were staged on The Great White Way? Or to account for the enormous influence of the Berliner Ensemble on generations of practitioners working in regional and nonprofit theater when more and more small theaters have begun to adopt the plays and production models of Broadway during the last few decades?

¹⁵ Friedman, "Dialectical Method in the Work of Brecht," 45.

If we consider theater history as still unfolding through numerous contradictions, we can make sense of the fact that from the middle 1990s, we have witnessed the Disneyfication of Times Square at the same time that overtly political (if not Brechtian) plays like *God of Hell* by Sam Shepard and *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo as well as *Caroline or Change* by Tony Kushner were staged on Broadway. What this anthology intends, then, is to consider the many encounters between Brecht and Broadway during the seventy or so years since *The Mother* was produced by Theatre Union in terms of dramaturgy, performance, and reception.

Before going further, it's worth defining what this anthology means by "Brecht" and "Broadway." Beginning with the latter, Broadway means, first of all, the geography of Times Square, with its venerable theaters like the Helen Hayes and the Plymouth as well as recently refurbished theaters like the New Amsterdam. This New York City district was historically an "occupational district," as McNamara rightly observes, rather "like the Diamond District to the east and north or the Garment District to the west and south."¹⁶ As such, Broadway theaters have been long influenced by pressures of place, culture, and history toward making profits rather than producing innovative or political theater. Although the Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway theater movements, which often took innovation as their mandate, demonstrate how these pressures can be resisted at historical moments and suggest the limits of Broadway hegemony.

But "Broadway" is also used in this anthology as synonym for commercial theater beyond New York City and even beyond the United States, like London's West End. Using this flexible definition of Broadway is justified by the fact that Broadway has become as much a way of producing theater (escapism, lots of spectacle, etc.) as it remains a locale for theater. Elizabeth Wollman, in fact, has demonstrated that Broadway has produced a trickle-down effect on the regional theaters that were originally defined against Broadway commercialism. Moving away from this traditionally "adversarial relationship," regional non-profit theaters have begun to embrace "a partnership in which the commercial realm looks to the non-profit for new works and smaller houses in which to test Broadway-bound material."¹⁷ Many non-profit theaters, in effect, have become rather like a farm-system for Broadway, testing shows without having to pay the exorbitant costs of mounting a production in a Broadway theater, an arrangement that has benefited both theaters

¹⁶ McNamara, 126.

¹⁷ Wollman, "The Economic Development of the 'New' Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical," 461.

economically, if not artistically. For the regional theater, they draw fuller houses and for Broadway, regional theaters replace the process of touring a big-budget extravaganza, which has become too expensive to be feasible during the last few decades.

Defining "Brecht," curiously enough, proves more difficult than defining "Broadway." This is true not just for this anthology but for the books on Brecht since his death in 1956, most of which attempt to *find* a new Brecht through their approach. Eric Bentley first recognized the significance of Brecht's dramaturgy but has too often tried to define Brecht as "poet and dramatist" and not, notably, theorist, Marxist, or philosopher.¹⁸ This approach is dubious in that trying to separate Brecht the dramatist from Brecht the Marxist may prove impossible since one continually nourished the other. Carl Weber defines Brecht as "genius," a definition that is potentially problematic in that it downplays the historicism of Brecht's thinking and writing in favor of the ahistoricism of humanism (although I doubt Brecht would have resisted the term himself). But Weber carefully locates this genius in Brecht's keen eye for paradox, a perceptiveness that grew out of his Marxism, and thereby avoids the pitfalls ignored by Bentley. Other books have "found" Brecht the poet,¹⁹ Brecht the rhetorician,²⁰ and Brecht the thinker.²¹

Regardless of the methodology employed in reading Brecht, it's difficult to define him because Brecht's opinions or at least the articulation of those opinions about dramaturgy, production, and reception frequently changed during his lifetime. His attitude toward the thinking/feeling dichotomy wrongly attributed to Brecht by many, for instance, softened over the years as demonstrated by reading "A Short Organum" (1946-1947) alongside "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" (1930). The tempering of his opinion about enjoyment has historical roots: in the earlier essay, he was fighting against the conventions of identification in Germany; in the latter, he was allowing for the coexistence of criticism and enjoyment. (A change that emerged from his experience with Broadway perhaps?) This anthology acknowledges these tensions but makes little effort to resolve them. In fact, the contributors have written about differing aspects of Brecht and Broadway, from Brecht's plays produced on Broadway to Brecht's name invoked on Broadway, to the theory of epic theater alongside commercial theater.

¹⁸ Bentley, 14.

¹⁹ Morley, *Brecht: A Study*.

²⁰ Speirs, *Bertolt Brecht*.

²¹ Oesmann, *Staging History: Brecht's Social Concepts of Ideology*.

Instead of resolving these tensions this anthology intends to "rediscover" the tensions *between* as well as *within* Brecht and Broadway. The word "rediscover" is borrowed from Manfred Wekwerth²² of the Berliner Ensemble, who used it to describe the ways that any theater practitioner should come to Brecht, and indicates the ways that U.S. criticism has forgotten Brecht in its complacency of knowing Brecht. The tensions between Brecht and Broadway have not been resolved, however much the stage history of Brecht's plays suggests otherwise. Brecht's dramas occasionally make it to Broadway stages and, more recently, Brecht's name has been invoked by reviewers and writers of Broadway theater, something that proves troubling when we consider closely how loosely terms like "epic" and "Brechtian" are deployed in ways that further confuse dramaturgical and ideological difference. This interest in Brecht, however misguided, prompts the historicism demonstrated by Norman Roessler's contribution to this book: "when, where, what, how, and why does American Theater reach for Brecht?" Asking such questions without presuming answers allows us to reconsider the history of modern and postmodern theater in the United States as growing out of competing and, yes, even contradictory traditions. An anthology of essays, each considering different encounters of Brecht and Broadway during the last seventy years and making their own competing and complementary claims about those encounters allows scholarship to "rediscover" Brecht through those encounters. What does it reveal about Brecht? About Broadway? More importantly, what do Brecht and Broadway reveal about the way theater is written and produced, performed and received in the United States? Less of a history of Brecht and Broadway, this anthology functions more as an intervention in history, particularly in the calcified view of history as closed: the divisions between Brecht and Broadway inevitable and not worth considering; the divisions within unacknowledged.

Brecht On Broadway

The Threepenny Opera revival by the Roundabout Theatre in 2006 demonstrates how much these tensions need to be rediscovered. Following the trend of casting popular actors and musicians,²³ this production included movie star Alan Cummings (*X Men 2*, *Son of the Mask*, *Pride and Prejudice*) as Macheath and singers Cyndi Lauper (*She's*

²² Wekwerth, "Questions Concerning Brecht."

²³ In 1989, John Dexter's *Threepenny Opera*, for instance, cast Sting as Macheath.

So Unusual 1983, *True Colors* 1986, *Wanna Have Fun* 1996) as Jenny and Nellie McKay (*Get Away from Me* 2004) as Polly. This casting strategy of loading the show with recognizable stars intended to attract audiences through name-recognition extends from Shakespeare to O'Neill to Brecht when revived on Broadway: a way of winning enthusiasm and thereby recouping investments. If Jim Schachter's op-ed piece published in *The New York Times* is any indication, this production was rather successful in the former ambition. The solitary complaint about *Threepenny* to emerge from this article was regarding the ending: "The finale ends with the performers filing off the stage in darkness. Nobody applauds, let alone stands and applauds."²⁴ Troubled by being denied the opportunity to show enthusiasm for the show—become necessary for closure for plays or musicals on Broadway these days—he offers this plaintiff query: "Why should the director get to take away my chance to register my judgment on his show?"²⁵ From the word "judgment" emerge the tensions between Brecht and Broadway being increasingly overlooked today. Determined to make some judgment, Schachter confuses judgment about the representation of the bloated and moribund society brought to the stage (which concludes with that worst of Broadway sins—having not fully satisfied audiences) with judgment about the bloated and moribund society beyond the stage (that deserves judgment in Brecht's estimation). So far has Brecht's concept of epic theater fallen in the U.S., a concept which intends to awaken and energize the critical faculty of audiences in relation to society, that his musical that indicted bourgeois tastes has become judged largely, if not entirely, on whether or not it satisfies those tastes thanks to the idiom of Broadway theater.

This confusion about Brecht and Broadway or Brecht *on* Broadway is subsidized by theater reviews like Ben Brantley's for *The New York Times*. Brantley found this production "shrill" and "numbing" rather than worthy of applause like Schachter.²⁶ But Brantley's criticism becomes thorny when he attempts to enumerate the revival's failings *as* epic theater. "This production has nothing like the sustained point of view that might hook and hypnotize audiences," he notes, and consequently "this *Threepenny* takes Brecht's notion of the theater of alienation to new self-defeating extremes."²⁷ I find nothing troubling about Brantley's conclusion that this production, which privileged sexual debauchery instead of capitalist exploitation, might fail as epic theater. But I am troubled by the reasoning

²⁴ Schachter, "All Over But the Clapping," par. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, par. 4.

²⁶ Brantley, par. 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 4.

of this argument. Linking this failure to "hypnotize" audiences to its failure as epic theater, implying that lulling audiences into a condition of suggestibility was a precondition for the critical engagement that Brecht intended, means misunderstanding or simply ignoring much of what Brecht wrote about epic theater.

In "A Short Organum," Brecht describes the kind of theatergoing (perhaps inspired by encounters with Broadway) that his epic theater was intended to replace in the following terms: "True, their eyes are open," he says of contemporary audiences, "but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance."²⁸ More than simply anachronism, this kind of reception was a vestigial holdover from the era of witches and priests when superstitions clouded reasoning—and *certainly not part of epic theater*. In fact, Brecht describes epic theater as a way of amending the cultural problem that follows from theater producing what he elsewhere calls "a cowed, credulous *hypnotized* mass" [emphasis added].²⁹ Brantley fails to recognize and, more importantly, fails to acknowledge this abiding principle of epic theater while chastising the Roundabout Theatre Company, whether through clumsiness (perhaps implying what he didn't intend) or confusion (simply not knowing). I might allow for the former except for the fact that Brantley demonstrates more confusion in the review by lamenting the production's inability to integrate "stylistic" components toward coherent criticism.

Unfortunately, Brantley's confusion is part of a larger misunderstanding of Brecht on and off Broadway demonstrated by a survey of reviews on Brecht plays since 2000. Writing for *The Washington Times*, Jayne Blanchard has similar difficulty with locating *A Man's a Man* in epic theater. "Galy [Gay] is meant to be an Every-Schlub," she says, supplying a summary of the play, "being exploited by a bunch of British soldiers, the widow Begbick and others until he is so estranged from his true self that he begins to adopt the persona of others."³⁰ While she captures the basics of the plot, she confuses the fundamental argument of *A Man's a Man*, which demonstrates the Marxist belief that there is no "true self"—a humanist concept that privileges individuality and psychology—beyond social identity. Blanchard apparently fails to grasp this tenet of Brechtian theater, even though Brecht makes this argument frequently, perhaps because she cannot escape emotional identification as means of audience reception when she talks

²⁸ Brecht, 187.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁰ Blanchard, "'A Man's a Man' Numbing, Inane," par. 8.

about Galy Gay. "He is supposed to be a blank slate, but the audience must experience some sense of shared humanity to want to join him on his bizarre journey."³¹ But surely anyone who has read Brecht's writing about theater can imagine other ways of engaging with Gay's journey.

Graydon Royce's review of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* for *The Star Tribune*, though, was more perplexing. He, too, demands psychology rather than sociology in staging Brecht's plays: "We seldom see the wheels of transformation working in Ui's mind, charting his course from small-time thug to supreme boss."³² This, despite the fact that Brecht rejects psychology, again beyond the social, and despite the fact that the psychology of Arturo Ui is second to the criticism of audiences watching the play, who become implicated in the rise of the eponymous Ui. More noteworthy is Royce's difficulty with the distinction between topical references and politics,³³ which contributes to his bizarre admonishment of those staging Brecht's plays: "let Brecht's work speak for itself and spare us the tortured politics."³⁴ Although not entirely representative of writing about Brecht, these reviews are nonetheless typical.

The irony of how poorly Brecht has been reviewed in the United States becomes plain if we remember Brecht's beginnings in theater. When he had written only *Baal* and an early version of *Drums in the Night* titled *Spartakus* in 1920, he was already writing "regular drama criticism for the *Volkswille*, a left-wing newspaper" in Augsburg.³⁵ Demonstrating a determination to test the limits of German theater at the time, Brecht soon became known as an *enfant terrible*. "Already in these early articles can be found in his impatience with reactionary trends in the drama and with production techniques of the time" that followed conventions instead of daring innovation.³⁶ More significant was his loudly announced antipathy toward the abiding mode of audience engagement: "he was demanding that the production should have 'intellectual format' rather than merely satisfying the emotions of audiences."³⁷ To evaluate the seriousness of plays, Brecht frequently made comparison to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* instead of considering how satisfied the play left audiences, a habit that reveals how seriously Brecht took his responsibility as a reviewer who was

³¹ *Ibid.*, par. 9.

³² Royce, "'Ui' Resonates but is Bugged Down by Politics," par. 7.

³³ At the end of the review, Royce complains about the production making reference to the WTO riots in Seattle and becoming too bogged down in politics.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 8.

³⁵ Morley, 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ Speirs, 36.

influencing the assumptions of a theatergoing public. He intended to educate that public by making them confront not just the banality of what they were watching but further the consequences of watching such banality.

This kind of reviewing stands in stark contrast to reviews today which tend to dumb-down audiences by misrepresenting what they describe—in particular in regards to Brecht's epic theater—or by describing superficiality as significance. There are notable exceptions, of course. Mark Blankenship of *Daily Variety* and Robert Hurwitt of *The San Francisco Chronicle* have, more often than not, written engaging and insightful reviews about Brecht's plays—without the aforementioned confusion about epic theater. Nonetheless, it's hard to quibble with Charles Lyons's conclusion about reviewers of theater: "this pervasive unwillingness to address either the past, the new, or the difficult ... insures the undistinguished writing about the theater in the American press."³⁸

It's easy to say, as Eric Bentley did in 1986 during a conference entitled "Brecht Thirty Years After," that Brecht cannot be held responsible for much of what is termed "Brechtian" today and wash our hands of the aforementioned confusion about Brecht and Broadway. After all, the legacy of Brecht never depended upon productions in the United States, much less on The Great White Way. But this confusion poses noteworthy problems for continued influence of Brecht on U.S. dramatists and directors as well as for theatergoing since without Brecht as what Tony Kushner describes as a possibility of alternatives,³⁹ theatergoing will become further conditioned by Broadway. Having survived the doldrums of the 1980s, Broadway theaters are now enjoying a boom in attendance, ticket-pricing, and overall profits the likes of which were almost unimaginable a decade earlier. Complaints about the costs of tickets then, which topped out around \$100 for orchestra seating, have turned into nostalgia today considering the new trend in premium tickets, which run from \$300 to \$500 per seat, described by Campbell Robertson. "Who buys these tickets? Those in the industry rattle off a list: people who want great seats at the last minute, people who have expense accounts, people who are not regular theatergoers and consider a show a special occasion and, that loveliest of all breeds, people who paying a high price is a pleasure in itself."⁴⁰ Attending a Broadway show, musical or play, has

³⁸ Lyons, "Addressing the American Theater" 166.

³⁹ See Carl Weber's interview with Kushner, "I Always Go Back to Brecht" in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*.

⁴⁰ Robertson, "Broadway's New Math: Top Dollar Tickets Equal Bigger Sales," par. 14.

always been a form of conspicuous consumption. But this commercialization of theatergoing has expanded exponentially with the investment of Disney in Times Square, in particular the refurbishment of The New Amsterdam for *The Lion King* and other shows like *Beauty and the Beast*, intended simply as escapism. Susan Bennett's "Theatre/Tourism" looks closely at how theatergoing within New York City and Las Vegas has been subsumed within the tourist industry. Citing the 2003 "Who Goes to Broadway?" report produced by the League of American Theatres and Producers, she stresses that "domestic tourists made up 49.3 percent of the audience for the year ending 1 June 2003" up from 46 percent the previous year, something that Disney has carefully marketed.⁴¹

Bennett warns against dismissing this cultural tourism, and she's right. This kind of theatergoing is what Kushner lampoons in *Angels in America*, the most successful U.S. play on Broadway that was influenced by Brecht. "Cats! It's about cats. Singing cats, you'll love it. Eight o'clock, the theatre's always at eight," Roy Cohn barks into the telephone, adding to Joe with his hand over the receiver, "Fucking tourists."⁴² Beyond expressing Kushner's frustration with the schlock mounted on Broadway in the name of returned-investments, this brief scene highlights what Kushner understands to be at issue in U.S. theatergoing today. Broadway is producing not just escapism on the stage but a particular kind of theatergoing that demands escapism and finds any socially or politically-conscious theater too heavy, too didactic, too unsatisfying to even be considered. When they come to New York City, tourist-theatergoers want the most culinary of theatrical fare rather than anything that might interrupt their holiday. It hardly matters what kind of tickets Cohn offers his clients since much of what is consumed during this cultural tourism depends on wowing audiences with spectacle and then lulling them into inert but fully satisfied trances with only thoughts of buying more tickets for their next trip. Audiences laugh, cry, clap—and then go home, after buying merchandise marketed alongside shows, without thought of any serious problem in their world.

The phrase "Broadway theater" is increasingly becoming redundant in the U.S.: Broadway *is* theater, is a kind of theater that promises and delivers escapism from the world's problems. Political theater, whether from Brecht or from those writing in the tradition of epic theater, is desperately needed today when journalism has abandoned much of its

⁴¹ Bennett, "Theatre/Tourism," 415.

⁴² Kushner, *Angels in America*, 13.

responsibility for informing the public beyond the latest pop-culture trend or in confronting abuses of power in our government. Saying Brecht isn't responsible for the confusions about Brechtian theater is tantamount to surrender to this kind of theatergoing. It means accepting the indissoluble opposition between Brecht and Broadway, with Broadway having won the future of theater. Or, it means accepting the co-opting and commodifying of Brecht's plays by Broadway.

The following essays, which consider the historical and dramaturgical encounters of Brecht and Broadway, work against this complacency. The ambition of this anthology is to rediscover the tensions *between* and *within* these traditions of theater that have influenced U.S. theater history since the 1930s. The anthology considers these encounters in three sections, the first of which traces the early clashes of Brechtian and Broadway theater. Anne Fletcher's study of *The Mother* when staged by Theatre Union in 1935 demonstrates the fundamental tensions from the beginning. Arminda Apgar's study of the mystifications of Brechtian theater during the years following *The Mother* up until recent productions in the U.S. transitions toward contemporary concerns. Then Ilka Saal's essay on Erwin Piscator's directing while working in New York City extends the problems outlined by Fletcher and Apgar toward a case-study of the diverging ambitions of epic and commercial theater during the 1940s and 1950s.

The next section looks at productions of Brecht's plays or Brecht-influenced performances on Broadway during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Norm Roessler's study of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at the National Theatre considers ways in which Brecht has been produced against the backdrop of Broadway after September 11, 2001. Kathryn Edney's essay turns toward the reviewing and marketing of *Urinetown: The Musical* through Brechtian reference and the confusions that followed. Then David Kornhaber's reading of Sarah Jones's one-woman show about ethnic politics on Broadway considers how Brechtian techniques might function without investment in Brechtian politics.

The final section looks toward the future of Brecht on Broadway, toward the (im)possibility of bridging the gap between epic and commercial theater. Dominic Symonds's reading of *Jerry Springer: The Musical* considers how Brecht finds surprising resonance in London's West End theaters, England's Broadway. William Burling's consideration of the U-effect, though, argues for the necessity of transforming theatergoing culture in the U.S. before Brecht can find resonance here. Ultimately, this book considers the following question from competing and even contradictory perspectives: What was the past, what is the present, and what will be the future of Brecht on Broadway?

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