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Cover Page Footnote

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Communist Deus Ex Machinas: The Brechtian Epic and its Influence Today

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Abstract

How did *The Threepenny Opera*, a sparsely-set musical theatre work with unsympathetic characters and borderline nonsensical songs draw popular acclaim, critical distaste, Nazi disdain, and musical covers by some of the top singers of the 20th and 21st century? A new type of modernist theatre emerged between the First and Second World Wars, pioneered by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who believed that the significance of a stage work lay not in its emotional appeal to the audience, but its frank depiction of social issues and moral imperative to reform a problematic society. The style was massively disruptive, partially for its divergence from the traditional German Romantic style and partially for its appeal to the masses, but was characterized by its insincere character portrayal by its actors, nonsensical plots, and spartan set design. Brecht acknowledged that these perhaps suited it only to its particular location and era. However, with the resurgence of a political climate similar to that which he experienced, audiences today can identify with the sense of unrest seen in Brecht's work. This paper analyzes the characteristics, role, and successes of 20th century German playwright Bertolt Brecht's unique style of theatre, the Brechtian epic, through the lens of one of his most significant works, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, or *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). By exploring both his style and the reception of this work we can better understand the lasting impact of Brecht and its significance in our society today.

Keywords: Musical Theatre, Weimar Germany, Bertolt Brecht, Epic Theatre, German Theatre

Active in Weimar Germany, the period between the first and second world wars, poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht developed a theatrical style and aesthetic which shaped its contemporary expectations of theatre and public opinion of the art form. The Brechtian style of theatre was well-suited to its time and drew both popular acclaim and scrutiny from critical and political spheres, but falls flat to the eyes and ears of 21st century viewers. Why is this? What characterized Brechtian theatre and made it significant in its day? What has changed about the theatre world that prevents modern viewers from enjoying it, and does the contemporary western political climate indicate the return of this revolutionary style?

The Development and Nature of the Brechtian Epic

Brecht himself wrote extensively on theatre as an art form and the necessary elements and ideologies of successful theatre, particularly his favorite styling, the broader category into which Brechtian theatre sits: modern epic theatre. Many of these letters and essays were compiled in the mid-20th century, edited and translated by John Willett into a book titled *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Over time, Brecht's concept of the societal role of the modern epic changed. In 1927 he wrote in his essay "The Difficulties of Epic Theatre" that the sooner a "radical transformation of the theatre" was accepted on a grander social scale as the new and continuing state of the institution, the sooner small theaters which selected transformative works for their productions would stop buckling under the immense artistic and social pressure that these works brought on. Later, in his 1957 essay, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," he acknowledged that only a certain type of audience member could truly appreciate the modern epic, and that the style was suited only for its time. What

characterized this “radically transformed” version of theatre? This question must be answered in two parts: like a Russian nesting doll, the Brechtian style is a smaller category within the larger category of the German modern epic, within the larger category of the stage arts themselves. While the last of these is too broad a topic to address in this analysis, it is prudent to dissect the modern epic style before more closely looking at its Brechtian subset.

The playwright’s “The Difficulties of Epic Theatre” provides a succinct, loose listing of the style’s most significant components:

To expound the principles of the epic theatre in a few catch-phrases is not possible. They still mostly need to be worked out in detail, and include representation by the actor, stage technique, dramaturgy, stage music, use of the film, and so on. The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason.

Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things. (23)

In a later essay, Brecht elaborated on the role of the actor in crafting a good epic: “But the actors... refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.” (Brecht 71) This is an important feature—the performers in a modern epic did not try, as modern performers do, to convince the audience that they really were the character, rather than an actor. The character was not to be shown to be admirable, but a caricature of a good or bad sort of person in order to further the narrative ideal of the work.

The characteristics of a modern epic were laid out in more detail by scholar Kim Kowalke in his 1993 article, “Singing Brecht vs. Brecht Singing: Performance in Theory and Practice”:

In these pieces of socially engaged music-theatre that the montage techniques eventually called ‘Brechtian’ were developed and the dramaturgical foundations of ‘epic’ drama laid. The four cornerstones of the new theatre comprised an unsentimental, *sachlich* [sober, material, factual] mode of presentation; development of new didactic genres for production outside the state-subsidized system; adaptation of cinematic techniques; and radical separation of the elements. (62)

These are not dissimilar from those elements loosely listed previously by Brecht in the “Difficulties of Epic Theatre” essay; this is significant in the indication that it was in fact Brecht’s ideas about the nature of the modern epic which shaped it, rather than Brecht playing a role as a mere playwright in a preexistent epic theatre culture or norm.

But while Brecht was instrumental in the formation of the German epic style as a whole, it is important to take care in utilizing his standard of it as the universal standard. This is where the aforementioned nested analysis comes into play: while Brecht was a significant figure in the development and progression of the German modern epic, some of the components and goals he put forth for the modern epic grew to be more characteristic of his own style, now known as the Brechtian epic. The two main points of divergence between works of the two styles are the moral goals of the narrative and the aesthetics of the staging, commonly referred to as Brechtian aesthetics.

A Brechtian epic’s moral imperative was its primary goal. The success of a Brechtian work lay in its ability to observe the world as it is—and it was impossible, per the playwright, for a spectator to see the world’s conditions for himself and not to feel morally obligated to change them. It follows that the goal of a Brechtian work was to illuminate the decrepit conditions of society, to arouse a moral outrage in its viewer, and to provide guidance as to the solution to this

moral plight. This can be attributed to the significance that Brecht's communist views played in his life and writing—he believed that through a good enough stage work he could engender a social uprising and right the wrongs of a fraught capitalist post-war society.

The import of the moral and observatory narrative in a Brechtian work necessarily led to the development of Brechtian aesthetics, the second major element dividing a Brechtian epic from a typical modern. This component revolves around the stage design of a production. In 1951, Brecht wrote an essay praising the stage designer (not any particular collaborator, necessarily, but rather an anonymous, potentially hypothetical associate sympathetic to Brecht's ideals) for the brilliance of an appropriate staging of a work. He described the nature of these aesthetics as “significant statements about reality. [The designer] takes a bold sweep, never letting inessential detail or decoration distract from the statement, which is an artistic and an intellectual one” (Brecht 231). Further, he elaborated, “In his designs our friend [stage designer] always starts with ‘the people themselves’ and ‘what is happening to or through them’. He provides no ‘décor’, frames and backgrounds, but constructs the space for ‘people’ to experience something in” (Brecht 231-2). A Brechtian stage was sparse, with the barest necessary dressings to depict the scene. This was necessary as, in Brecht's words, “whatever does not further the narrative harms it.” (Brecht 232) In a Brechtian epic, the moral imperative was the foremost feature, and anything—authentic character portrayal by the actors, intricate staging, etc.—which distracts from this had to be eschewed. These elements, as well as those which characterize both the Brechtian and standard modern epics, can be best understood through the examination of a work which significantly encapsulates the Brechtian principles—the playwright's most popular work, *The Threepenny Opera*.

Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera), 1928

The Threepenny Opera held much acclaim in its day, with its songs persisting later in popularity, receiving covers and performances by notable 20th and 21st century performers Bobby Darin, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Nina Simone, Bea Arthur, Frank Sinatra, Michael Bublé, and Sting. The musical work was the result of a collaboration between Brecht and Kurt Weill, another notable figure in the development of theatre in Weimar Germany. The two worked together on multiple projects, with *Threepenny* being arguably the most successful. The play was massively popular with audiences, but not so with critics, who found it distasteful that the music and story were so enjoyed by the masses; they wanted to set apart popular and artistic music, and Weill and Brecht's blurring of such boundaries confounded and upset them. They found the work to be trashy, vulgar, pointless, and unintelligent, appealing only to what the critics perceived to be the lowest members of society, with one critic describing a number of passages as such: "This extraordinary cheapness and slanginess is characteristic of almost the whole piece, dialogue and verse". (Hinton 139)

The plot was, in those critics' defense, entirely nonsensical. This was necessitated by the Brechtian ideals which shaped the narrative but without an understanding of the theory behind the work and the significance of this to the piece, it appears ridiculous. The play opens on debauchery in Soho and a street-singer detailing the deeds and infamy of the protagonist, Mack the Knife, a criminal comparable to today's gang and cartel leaders. It is then revealed that Mack is preparing to marry one Polly Peachum, daughter of Jonathan Peachum, the infamous "Beggar King". The local police chief, Tiger Brown, is a good friend of Mack's (perpetually oblivious to his crimes) and arrives to the wedding to congratulate the pair on their matrimony; he then quickly departs to finalize preparations for the Queen's coronation the following day. Polly and

Mack celebrate their wedding night, and she returns to her parents' house, where the Beggar King (so-called because of the shop he owns, where a beggar can acquire costumes to make himself look like a cripple and turn a greater profit from passerby) is distraught over the union and decides to report Mack to the police for his crimes. He sets off to retrieve his son-in-law—Polly discovers this and warns Mack, taking his stead as gang leader when he flees. Mack heads to his favored brothel, but he is turned in to the police when Jenny, his favorite prostitute, becomes jealous that he has married another woman. Mack is caught and taken into custody. This greatly upsets Brown, who plans to release Mack and aid his escape, until Mr. Peachum arrives and threatens to ruin the queen's coronation if Mack is not hanged. This would be disastrous for Brown—as the head coordinator of operations for the ceremony, this would ensure the loss of his job, if not criminal proceedings. Brown concedes to Peachum's demands, and Mack remains imprisoned, taken to the gallows early the following morning. Fortunately, however, a king's messenger arrives at the last possible moment, with no previous indication that the king knew of Soho's gang wars or Mack's imprisonment, and pardons him. (Hinton 1-4)

How does this work encapsulate the Brechtian ideal? The author, in 1928, wrote on his work, describing its moral message: “We have a social order in which virtually all strata of the population, albeit in extremely varied ways, follow moral principles—not, of course, by living *within* a moral code but *off* it” (Hinton 122). As Brecht saw it, his characters were not themselves immoral, and rather represented the conditions a poor person would naturally find themselves in within the framework of a society and economy which fails its members. The Beggar King, for example, demonstrates the following:

“Mr. Jonathan Peachum has a novel way of capitalizing on human misery by artificially fitting out healthy human beings as cripples and sending them out to beg, thereby making

a profit from the sympathy of the prosperous classes. He does not do this because he is in any way innately bad. [His] position in the world is one of self-defense.” (Hinton 121)

The work’s modern epic nature was also evident in the plot. The characters’ decisions were ill-informed and unrealistic, and the *deus ex machina* of the king’s messenger dispelled any remaining investment the audience may have had in the outcome of the story for its players (Brecht described this as intentional, somewhat parodistic of a traditional opera finale). The characters’ easy betrayal of one another, blindness in the face of glaring dispositional flaws (such as Brown’s obliviousness to Mack’s crimes and Polly’s willingness to aid her new husband despite his immediate, blatant infidelity), and lack of any sympathetic personality for the audience to grow attached to also contribute. These features are, of course, tenets of the modern or Brechtian epic—the *sachlich*, the unsentimental presentation in favor of sociological observation and political motivations.

The work onstage served as a prime example of Brechtian aesthetics. In the photograph found in Appendix A, one can see that the stage was sparse, the only significant set-pieces being a chain link fence and hanging light. The actors did not wear elaborate costumes, there were no visible props, and the lighting was uncomplicated and only highlighted the most significant figures of the scene. The backdrop was not illustrative, and instead contained a short description of the scene in its original German, cast onto the back of the stage by a projector—a new, uncommon element of theatre at the time, and a reflection of the era’s changing technological capabilities: an element laid out by both Kowalke and Brecht himself as a main characteristic of a modern epic. The play, while absurd in plot and drab in staging to a 21st century onlooker, did highlight all of the most important aspects of a Brechtian epic and serves as a nearly perfect example of the form.

The Brechtian Epic's Place in Historical and Contemporary Theatre

The Brechtian epic was unlike the theatre seen previously in Germany or indeed like anything one might see onstage today. The Brechtian style was a divergence from the Romantic style upheld at the time as the pinnacle of German stage composition—this was intentional, as Brecht had different priorities in his works and believed, as stated before, that a radical transformation in the nature of a stage play was necessary to achieve them. But while the style was publicly successful in its time, it would—if completely unchanged—likely fail today, due to the different philosophical priorities and the expectation of amusement for a contemporary theatregoer. This can be explained by the prevalence of postmodernism and the changes in the nature of a story caused by the progression of the genres of the novel, the film, and the television show.

The German Romantic style was, first and foremost, emotional. It aimed to represent beauty, to admire ideas, to express longing, to be in constant flux in its representations and positions on its subjects. This is a short, vague list of its qualities to be sure, but this is due to the nature of romanticism—per John Blankenagel in his work “The Dominant Characteristics of German Romanticism”, “It is impossible to reduce the spirit of romanticism to a pure formula, because that does violence to one of its principal characteristics (namely, eternal becoming)” (Blankenagel 4). Richard Wagner, active from 1833 until his death in 1883, was both so prolific and so influential in the Romantic style that “Wagnerian” is nearly synonymous with German Romanticism. He heavily emphasized the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, total artwork—the idea that all components (libretto, score, narrative, staging) of a work should blend together to create a unified piece.

Kowalke described Brecht as resistant to participate in this, using “radical separation of the elements... to avoid the “muddle” of a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*” (Kowalke 62). Brecht believed the separation of theatrical elements to be useful in impressing an instruction—hence, Brechtian aesthetics. Why use the sets, costumes, etc. of a production to form a significant portion of a play when the message was best delivered through the text of it? It is also important to note how the plot and the score of Brechtian stage works diverged—it was conventional for a show’s music to rise and fall with the narrative, to “advance or underscore the action on stage” (Kowalke 56), but Brecht (and Weill, his collaborator) found it better for music only to interrupt the action, making its own point in the narrative rather than helping along another component. These divergences from the so-upheld Wagnerian ideal were what made Brechtian epics so explosive in the theatre world, especially amongst critics—and later, at the end of the Weimar era, the Third Reich. The Nazis upheld the German Romantic as the ideal art form for its strong national identity and principles, and the significance of Wagner in western culture at the time, providing Germany with an artistic figurehead and proof that German music was admired greatly outside its country of origin. They distrusted the stylistic transformation Brecht so desired and did not fully appreciate the reasons or effects of these disparities from the more traditional style. Despite the critical distaste for the modern epic, it was nevertheless culturally significant and stylistically revolutionary in its era. However, the extensive popularity is unlikely to be completely replicated for Brechtian works today.

The convention and expectation for contemporary theatre and musical theatre more closely resembles the Romantic than the Brechtian. This is not due to a widespread neo-romantic movement but rather the continuing influence of postmodernism. This philosophy, which gained popularity and influence in the 1960s and persists today, rejects the idea of a universal, objective

reality, and is skeptical of any assertion of aesthetics as anything other than subjective or arbitrary. To some degree, it relies on solipsism, the idea that the self and one's own perceptions of the world are the only things which are truly epistemologically confirmable. This predilection for individualism, and the individual's value of their own experiences, means the theatre is now most successful with audiences when it is personal. It has returned in many ways to the dramatic, Romantic style Brecht contrasted with the epic in "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction—" "The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable... - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh" (Brecht 71). The audience member wishes to see their own struggles played out by the characters, wishes to see a happy resolution, to see justice served, wishes to empathize and feel connected with the narrative. In a contemporary stage play or musical, the character reigns supreme over the moral. The music and aesthetics are important elements in themselves, but they are intricately woven with the narrative, characterization, and themes, rather than acting as mere frames for the narrative. Spectators' primary goal is to enjoy the journey undergone by the characters presented to them. In "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction", Brecht described the difference between dramatic and epic theatre—where the dramatic was empathetic, the viewer sympathizing with the characters and enjoying the show's spectacle for the way he could see himself in the story, the epic theatre did not elicit empathy from its audience but an intentional, crafted disgust; an epic theatre's spectator should have been inspired to drive social reform. Brecht insisted that despite this, the epic theatre was not "a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair." (72) He felt that while an appropriate epic play, opera, musical, etc. must center its focus on the education of the masses rather than appealing to their sympathies, this did not have to

render the work miserable to endure, as the right spectator would be intrinsically motivated to acquire as much knowledge as possible in order to drive a social change and alter the suffering he faces in the day to day. Thus, an instructional and unsympathetic play could still entertain him. While this may be, it falls out of line with the expectations of a contemporary theatregoer.

While the current convention of musical theatre is no longer anything like that which Brecht upheld, our contemporary absence of the conventions and aims of the modern epic would not terribly upset their champion.

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theatre... [Other] theatrical forms corresponded to the particular trends of their time, and vanished with them. Similarly the modern epic theatre is linked with certain trends. It cannot by any means be practiced universally... Up to now favorable circumstances for an epic and didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time... It demands not only a certain technological level but a powerful movement in society which is interested to see vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution, and can defend this interest against every contrary trend. (Brecht 75-6)

Brecht, at the end of “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction”, explained that the modern epic was suited to its time and political climate and was not designed to be universal or eternal as a convention for theatre. The fall of its significance was expected. Despite this, it is possible that some version of the Brechtian style, in coming years, may resurge. Listed by Brecht as prerequisites for the rise of the modern epic were the development of new technology and a powerful societal need for change—it would not be inaccurate to describe the current day and age as possessing both of these.

Modern technology makes both stage works and their criticisms so widely available to the public that the criticisms faced by Brecht in his day for blurring the line between artistic and popular culture are near-obsolete, and allows for Brecht's "radical separation of the elements" to be furthered—for example, reading a PDF of the script on a tablet, or listening to the songs with a streaming service—allowing these components to speak for themselves and the moral imperatives delivered through them not only to be experienced individually, but constantly (rather than just once, in an opera house). The ease of communication between content-creators and content-consumers has been drastically heightened with the rise of social media. I invite you to consider how *Threepenny Opera*'s social reception might have been even more widespread and more controversial had Brecht been able to have a question-and-answer session about the play's themes with viewers on Twitter. These conditions have made their impact on the world of art and theatre and create a perfect breeding ground for Brechtian ideals to be reborn.

Additionally, it can be argued that the current American sociopolitical climate is rather parallel to that experienced by Brecht in Weimar Germany, considering a large debt to a foreign power, strong nationalist and isolationist sentiments in the general populace, financial inflation, a large national bureaucracy, highly politicized media scorned by national leaders as hysterical, deceptive, and subversive, polarized extremist groups, and a heavy push towards allowing citizens to remain armed. These political similarities might suggest a return to the themes and aims of a Brechtian stage play, but whether modern audiences could relinquish their emotional connection to its narratives remains to be seen.

It is possible that a new variant of a Brechtian epic will emerge, with political-moral imperatives and empathy converging, perhaps with a lack of overly-sparse Brechtian aesthetics (or not, considering low funding for the arts and small set budgets) but significant separation of

theatrical elements, and greater use of technology, both in the stage works and the conversation around them. The Brechtian style, for all its apparent incompatibility with what contemporary audiences want, is not necessarily doomed to fade into historical obscurity, but instead may rise again in a more 21st century palatable form.

Appendix A

Photographer unknown. Taken either during rehearsals or the premiere of *Threepenny* at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin in 1928. The image depicts an interaction between Lucy, another of Mack's conquests, and Tiger Brown discussing what to do about Mack.

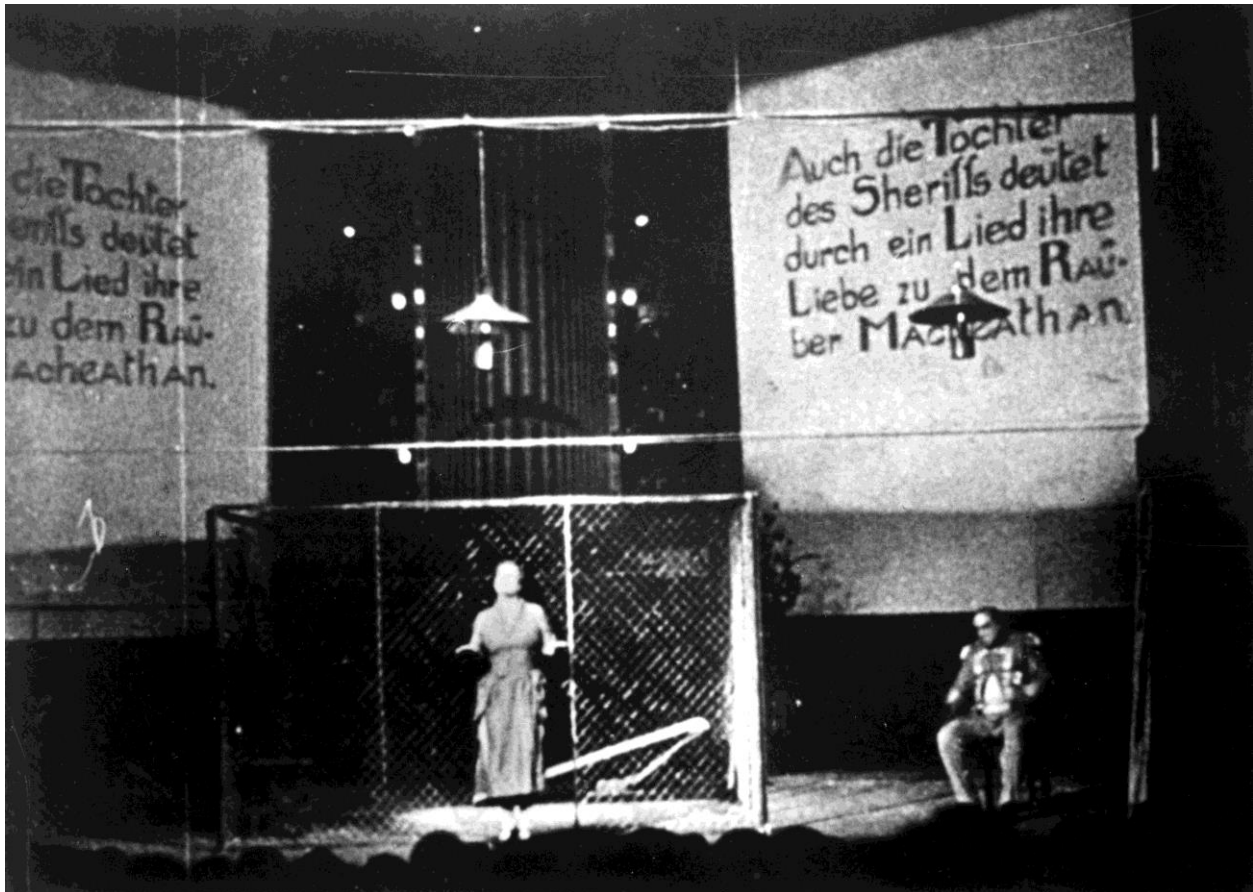


Image courtesy of the Weill-Lenya Research Center, Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, New York.

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