

10 CHEERS

FOR BRECHT

We need Brecht. We need him more than ever. And here's why.

1. Fun

In 1920 Brecht writes 'I am a predator and behave at the theatre just as I would in a jungle. I need to destroy things'. His early plays – like *Baal*, *Drums in the Night* and *In the Jungle of the Cities* – are pure filth: offensive, crude, violent, sexually ambiguous, nihilistic, anarchic and nasty. And tremendous fun. Fun (Spass) is a key word from the very beginning of Brecht's thinking about theatre. When he comes to Marxism at the end of the 1920s, he doesn't abandon the fun; he finds ways of giving the fun a sharp edge and a purpose and a politics. The ponderous, official established German theatres with their rules about playmaking and their

stuffy conventions of theatregoing, none of them, says Brecht, 'offers you any fun for your five cents'. His shows have jokes and they have songs and they're satirical and enraging and physical and fun. And this fun extends right through theatre work, from the actor ('a man who is not having fun himself cannot expect anyone to have fun watching him') to the writer (what Brecht liked about Bernard Shaw was that 'he likes writing... the effects of his inimitable cheerful and infectious good mood are extraordinary'). Some people think the theatre is at its most important when it is at its most solemn. These people are wrong and Brecht knows it.

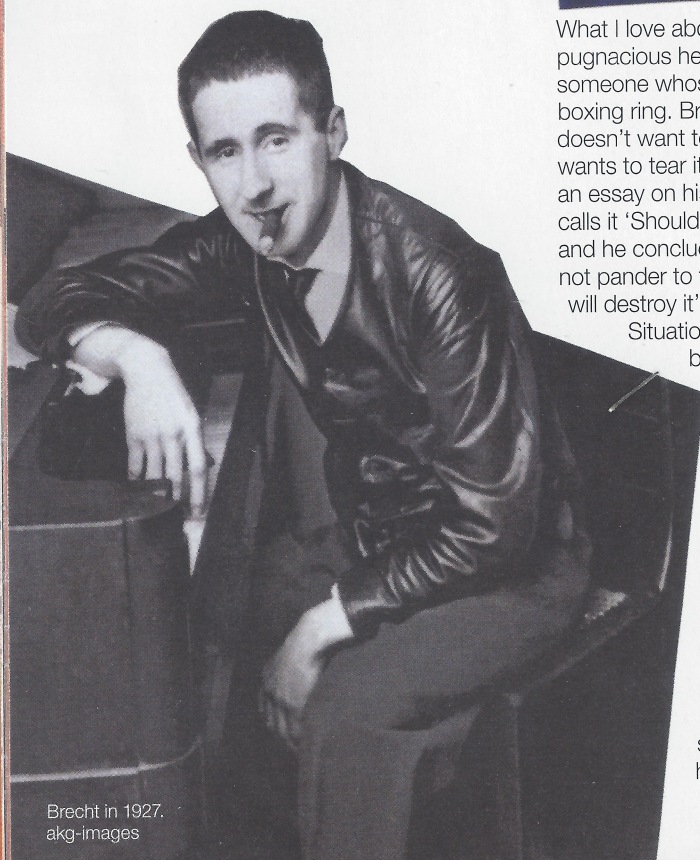
2. Aggression

What I love about Brecht is how pugnacious he is – not surprising for someone whose ideal theatre was a boxing ring. Brecht is not polite. He doesn't want to reform the theatre; he wants to tear it up. In 1927, he writes an essay on his new theatre practice; he calls it 'Should we Liquidate Aesthetics?' and he concludes, 'These new plays will not pander to the old aesthetics, they will destroy it'. Forty years later, the

Situationists wanted their books bound in sandpaper so that the very act of taking a situationist tract on and off the shelf would destroy the other books around it. Brecht's theatre wants to destroy the theatre around it.

3. Music

Brecht loves music. Make your characters break out in song and you've already started to disrupt the hypnosis of conventional



Brecht in 1927.
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TOLT BRECHT!

by Dan Rebellato

theatre. And what songs! His collaboration with Kurt Weill ranks alongside the great musical partnerships of the twentieth century: Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lennon & McCartney, Morrissey & Marr... And is there any other playwright whose lyrics have been sung by Frank Sinatra, The Doors, and David Bowie?

4. Politics

Dramatists had hitherto represented the world; the point is to change it. Brecht's theatre is political. But it's not political in its messages. It's political in its very bones, in the very experience of going to that theatre. In much conventional theatre, the audience focuses on heroes and heroines, their personal journeys, their psychological crises; we empathise with them and when they weep, we weep. It is a form of hypnosis, Brecht says, and it suckers us into the way capitalism wants us to see the world. The most important forces in our lives are outside us – they are money and industry and trade and power – but psychological realism tells us that everything is individual. Conventional theatre privatises our understanding of the world, the way the Tories are privatising the NHS.

Is Brecht Marxist? Well yes – you have to be a pretty committed Marxist to try to adapt the Communist Manifesto in rhyming couplets. But is the work Marxist? That's complicated. Brecht's theatre is about an audience thinking for itself. We observe the events on stage; we see the relationships; we understand the forces working on the characters and the motives that guide them. We have space to think, to reflect, to puzzle it out and see different sides of it, to form our own judgment. Is thinking for yourself Marxist? Brecht thinks so and wouldn't it be amazing if he's right?

5. Smoking

Brecht loves his cigars. He wants the audience sitting back and smoking, enjoying and assessing what they see. In his brilliant long essay 'Short Organon for the Theatre' (1949), he imagines the actor smoking a cigar through the play only putting it down when needing to demonstrate something else that their character did, like a great storyteller giving you another part of their tale. Because the theatre should be part of ordinary lives; we shouldn't stop what we're doing for theatre. As Brecht says, that's the attitude that asks us to leave our brains in the cloakroom with our coats. Of course, we can't smoke indoors any more. I'm not sure Brecht would be too impressed by vaping. How can we develop that easy, relaxed, engaged but self-present state of mind that Brecht calls the 'watching-while-smoking attitude'?

6. Learning

Brecht is didactic; he says so himself. But this word is not a good one. It conjures up the idea of being lectured and hectored from the stage. This never happens in Brecht. He just means that we should learn things at the theatre. And who doesn't like learning something new? The best teachers don't force opinions and facts on their students - they give their students tools for understanding. Brecht's plays inform us; they set us moral and political puzzles to figure out. Brecht calls the educational aspects of his theatre the 'cheerful process of finding out'. That's all.

7. Theatricality

Brecht's theatre is theatre at its most theatrical. In the 1920s, when the conventional theatre struggled with the new aesthetics of Brecht and his comrades, he sees a 'battle between

theatre and play'. At that point, he expects the battle to be won in his favour, but slowly he comes to realise that the theatre should always be a battleground, riven with juxtapositions, conflicts and contradictions. Not for him the totalitarian unison of a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*: he thought all the elements of theatre – the actor, the writing, the songs, the design, the lights, the projections, the audience – should have their own space and their own claim on the audience. Actors don't hide their acting; the designer doesn't hide her carpentry; the text is open to question. We watch Brechtian theatre and we're almost backstage, arguing over a last-minute rewrite. (And who doesn't love a glimpse of the backstage?)

8. Theory

Brecht's theories make British people nervous. It's the most common excuse people use to dismiss him. The theories are too doctrinaire! They're too abstract! They're nothing new! They don't work in practice! They smother the practice! Theory in the theatre is so boring! But you and I know, don't we, that there is no one more boring in the theatre than the person who affects to be bored by Brecht. Roland Barthes, one of Brecht's early and most influential champions in France, writes about this anti-intellectual pose in his essay 'Blind and Dumb Criticism'; to people who pretend not to understand Marxism, he says, you can be sure of one thing: Marxism understand you all too well. Brecht's theories are dazzling, punchy, subtle, full of sly humour and brilliant observation; they soar out of his theatre practice and they swoop back into it. He's the greatest theatre theorist of the last hundred years. No one else comes close.

9. New stories

A year after *The Threepenny Opera* opened, Brecht writes: 'Petroleum creates new relationships... Petroleum balks at the five-act form'. He means that the kinds of human relationships brought about by the oil industries – from surveyors to engineers to shipping magnates and tanker drivers to car manufacturers and

motorists to the victims of accidents and emissions – are not possible in the old theatre. Now, he writes, 'the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen is nowhere near adequate even to dramatizing a simple newspaper report'. How could the psychological intensity of Naturalism and domestic realism, he asks, capture the fact that 'everything – absolutely everything – had become a commodity?' We need to tell new stories, even more so now. What are the dramatic forms we need to understand Wikileaks and Anonymous, the Panama Papers and Occupy, the multiple forms of weightless, globalised, borderless market transactions that shape the course of our lives down to the most granular levels of experience? The cinema won't do it, Brecht realises. Those idiots who think they've got 'story' figured out, who bore us all with MacGuffins and Inciting Incidents and Third-Act Jeopardy: they are nothing less than the Commissars of capitalism's cultural policy.

10. Emotion

Brecht's theatre is very emotional, despite rumours to the contrary. His plays are full of extraordinary scenes of intense emotion: Mother Courage lamenting the death of her son; Simon finding his lost love Grusha holding a child that is not his. But although we understand that despair, and we feel the emotional force of these situations, the emotion is just part of what we watch. We also know that Mother Courage is a war profiteer and she bears great responsibility for her son's death. We know that Grusha cannot explain her situation, because armed soldiers are searching for the very child she is holds in her arms. In a mischievous short essay from 1937 entitled 'Short List of the Most Frequent, Common and Boring Misconceptions about Epic Theatre', Brecht wearily addresses the charge that the his theatre is coldly anti-emotion. It isn't, he explains; it just doesn't believe that emotions are everything. But he adds, isn't it interesting how conventional theatre makers scream blue murder when you try to bring ideas into the work?

Because emotions are vital. They are the colour of our everyday experience. But they're not everything. A bit of sitting back, smoking on a cigar, coolly assessing the way the world is might be good for us. Certainly, as we blunder through an EU Referendum with only fear, pride, suspicion, hostility, resentment, and mistrust to guide us, we might think that we could do with a bit of Brecht. Now more than ever.

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A placard along the Berlin Wall in 1968, reads 'Man has one flaw - he thinks'.
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