

BRECHT AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY:
POLITICAL COMEDY ON BROADWAY AND THE WEST END, 1960-1965

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This dissertation investigates the development of popular political drama on Broadway and the West End in the first half of the 1960s. It puts English and American theatre histories in dialogue, suggesting an approach to *Anglo-American* theatre history as both an institutional and a cultural frame. By investigating the incorporation of Brechtian drama and theatre theory into New York and London theatres, I argue that although Brecht's works themselves failed on the mainstream stage, an embrace of Brechtian theory by select theatre practitioners informed a new type of radical political comedy that succeeded on the West End and Broadway in the early 1960s.

Chapter 1 is an intellectual history of the perception and reception of the avant-garde in the late 1950s through the 1960s, paying special attention to the work of Susan Sontag. It establishes a critical and cultural milieu in which we can interpret the unfolding development of Brechtian theatre theory. The different critical methodologies that came out of this changing moment reflect the relationship between the avant-garde, postmodernism, and comedy that informs the subsequent cultural history of 1960s Anglo-American theatre. Chapter 2 examines the Brechtian dialectical theatre and its relation both to the historical avant-garde and to a postmodern critique of culture. I postulate that Brecht's project for a political theatre operates through a comic dialectic and that a sense of comedy is essential in realizing the radical potentialities of Brecht's theatre. Chapter 3 traces the English-language

dissemination of Brecht's dramas and theories, which in the early 60s unfolded in the context of on-going attempts to (re)define the "avant-garde" in relation to English and American realism. In Chapters 4 and 5, I present *Beyond the Fringe*, *Oh What a Lovely War*, and *Marat/Sade* as case studies of successfully radical productions on Broadway and the West End which placed history into a critical dialectic and challenged the audience to question where history has become myth or a narrative of transcendent truth, through varying adoptions of comic, Brechtian, and Artaudian performance.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Anne Elizabeth Beggs received a B.A. in Theatre in 1997 from the School of Theatre at the University of Southern California. She received her M.A. in Theatre from Cornell University in January 2006.

Dedicated to my parents, Tom and Flo Beggs,
and my sister, Jane.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre Histories

Writing a sixties cultural history, one comes upon an interesting phenomenon: although “The Sixties” is usually written around the 1968 tent-pole—the contexts leading up to 1968 and its aftermath—there is another remarkable indicator of rupture: 1963. British historian Arthur Marwick, for one, in his comprehensive (and exhaustive) history *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c.1958-1974*, divides the study at 1963. There were “The First Stirrings of a Cultural Revolution, 1958-1963,” and then “The High Sixties” unfolded from 1964 to 1969.¹ Bruce McConachie’s *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War* stops at 1962. Sally Banes boldly declares that “[i]n 1963 what we now call the Sixties began” in her monograph on “Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body.”²

When we consider this particular date, it is also notable that the majority of American theatre histories that start here focus upon the burst of experimental performance, such as Banes’s *Greenwich Village 1963*; James Harding’s and Cindy Rosenthal’s collection *Re-staging the Sixties: radical theatre and their legacies*; Bradford Martin’s *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Public Performance in Sixties America*; Steven Bottoms’s *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*; and Mike Sell’s *Avant-Garde Performance & the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement*. These studies offer a fuller history of American experimental and activist theatre, charting the influence and legacies of such groups as the Living Theatre; the Bread and Puppet Theatre; the San Francisco Mime Troupe; At the Foot of the Mountain; the Open Theatre; the Performance Group; the Free Southern

¹ Marwick, *The Sixties*.

² Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 1.

Theatre; El Teatro Camposito; the Diggers; and the Play-House of the Ridiculous; performance spaces such as Caffè Cino, Café La Mama and the Judson Poets' Theater; and performance art such as Happenings and Fluxus. Indeed, in a special May 2002 *Theatre Survey* issue on theatre in the sixties, guest editors James Harding and Mike Sell confess to this strategy yet again, admitting "a loss of this [historical] sense of plurality when, at the expense of mainstream and popular theatres, scholarship focuses too narrowly on the experimental theatrical practices of the 1960's, a practice that we admittedly perpetuate in the special issue of *Theatre Survey*."³

In the interest of expanding our understand of sixties theatre history, the following study investigates this moment of cultural change in the context of the mainstream, commercial theatre industry. The interrogation of Broadway theatre is also, inevitably, an engagement with the mainstream London theatre scene as well. As chapters 3 and 4 of this study will demonstrate, the post-World War II theatre audiences in both New York and London were linked by ever-increasing similarities in demographics and a shared culture of affluence and consumption, and the cross-Atlantic dialogue between critics, playwrights, directors, and producers was vital to the development of new works, translations, and artistic techniques. My aim is not to gloss over the significant differences in the development and production processes in each theatre realm, but I think that the balance of handicaps in each realm (i.e., the lack of a public subsidy for the arts in the U.S.; continued censorship by the Lord Chamberlain in London until 1968) informed the cross-Atlantic theatrical dialogue in an important way. The system of public subsidy for the Royal Shakespeare Company, for instance, was instrumental in supporting the development process behind Peter Brook's groundbreaking production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, which is the focus of chapter 5. Likewise, as English director Richard Eyre has pointed out in a popular

³ Harding and Sell, "Research and Pedagogy for a Turbulent Decade," 2.

history of British and American theatre in the twentieth-century, “the American theatre continued to provide the body of [post-1956] British theatre—if not with the life-giving jolt—then at least with a stimulating transfusion.”⁴ In fact, by the mid-1960s there were already signs that these respective institutional obstacles were weakening: in 1965 President Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, laying the groundwork for federal subsidies through the NEA and the NEH, and in Britain also in 1965 the power of the Lord Chamberlain was being tested and subverted by the Royal Court Theatre with their “club performance” productions of John Osborne’s *A Patriot for Me* and Edward Bond’s *Saved*.⁵ By putting American and British theatre histories into dialogue—such as McConachie’s *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War* and Harding and Rosenthal’s *Radical Theatres and their Legacies*; and Dominic Shellard’s *British Theatre Since the War* and Stephen Lacey’s *British Realist Theatre*—this study is, in part, an argument for *Anglo-American* theatre history as both an institutional and a cultural frame.

A key trope in these theatre histories of the 1960s is an increasing engagement with the concept of the avant-garde in general, and with the legacy of Bertolt Brecht in particular. By investigating the incorporation of Brechtian drama and theatre theory into New York and London theatres, I argue that although Brecht’s works themselves failed on the mainstream stage, an embrace of Brechtian theory by select theatre practitioners informed a new type of radical political comedy that succeeded on the West End and Broadway in the early 1960s. My argument is, in part, founded upon the postulate that Brecht’s project for a political theatre operates through a comic dialectic and that a sense of comedy is essential in realizing the radical potentialities of

⁴ Eyre and Wright, *Changing Stages*, 190.

⁵ Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, 136-146.

Brecht's theatre, as I establish in chapter 2. In this endeavor I am building on several important interventions in Brechtian theatre history, such as Loren Kruger's *Post-imperial Brecht* and Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis*, which have traced the influence of Brechtian techniques and theatre theory in sites of postcolonial and feminist resistance in the theatre. Other influential studies have traced the importance of Brecht on British theatre specifically in the second half of the twentieth-century, especially Janelle Reinelt's *After Brecht: British epic theater* and Margaret Eddershaw's *Performing Brecht: Forty years of British performances*. Reinelt, in particular, confronts directly the discrepancy between Brecht in Britain and in the U.S., and she rightly points out that the "Marxist vocabulary of class analysis and economism has enjoyed public parlance in Britain, while in the United States such rhetoric has always been regarded suspiciously and any form of socialism anathema,"⁶ a cultural diagnosis that certainly still holds true in light of the contemporary resurgence of "socialism" as a rhetorical accusation in America. While it is true that the playwrights Reinelt analyzes (Howard Brenton, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, David Hare, Trevor Griffiths, and John McGrath) did not enter the American repertory to the extent they have in the U.K., and the U.S. has not spawned a comparative school of Brechtian political playwrights, nevertheless the recuperation and reinvention of what I analyze as the Brechtian comic dialectic was influential on both sides of the Atlantic, and this new surge in Brechtian political theatre in the early 1960s was in part fueled by the New York-London theatre trade route.

This process of production and distribution was informed not only by the increasing visibility of Bertolt Brecht's dramas, production techniques, and theatre theories, but also by a larger shift in the public discourse of what the radical, the experimental, and the avant-garde might mean in American and British culture in the

⁶ Reinelt, *After Brecht*, 4.

1960s. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a definition of “radical” as: “Characterized by independence of, or departure from, what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox, or revolutionary (in outlook, conception, design, etc.).”⁷ This connotation has developed from a root meaning of the word; namely, that the “radical” stems from the root or origin of something. In this analysis I am adopting this connotation of the radical as a push against the dominant operations of capitalist hegemony and imperialism as roots lying deep beneath the Anglo-American institutions of the Broadway and West End theatre; I am excavating their theatre histories for evidence of artistic endeavors that worked independently of an unfulfilled revolution, independently of activist theatres, subverting rather than destroying the established institution of “the theatre.” What I am calling “radical moments” in the Broadway and West End theatres of 1960s were moments when the performance directly confronted the audience with its own process of consumption of art, a confrontation that becomes political in the largest sense as participation in a capitalist civil society. Another important quality of this subversion is its placement of history into a critical dialectic, which confronts the present moment with the process of historiography: the successfully radical productions offered as case studies, *Beyond the Fringe*, *Oh What a Lovely War*, and *Marat/Sade*, challenged the audience to question where history has become myth or a narrative of transcendent truth. These artistic developments are not only part of literary and institutional changes in the Anglo-American theatre, but also part of a larger historical shift in interpretive frameworks. Accordingly, this study is not only a contextual theatre and dramatic history, but also an exploration of how we might read developments in aesthetic theory as part of theatre history in the larger purview of cultural studies.

⁷ OED Online.

Methodologies: Cultural-Historical Contexts

Tracing the politics of intellectual and cultural study in Britain, France, and the U.S. in the 1960s, historian Alf Louvre points out that “the cross-fertilization of ideas and movements, the international circulation of radical social analyses and political strategies, rested, above all, on a sense of the transnational nature of the economic and political powers to be confronted.”⁸ With this insight, we might consider how the mediation of intellectual critique shares its global nature with what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* dubbed the “Culture Industry.” In this project I am putting some of these intellectual theories of this moment in dialogue with cultural criticism to demonstrate how the mediation of aesthetic analysis (aesthetics in its largest sense: not only structures of evaluation but the process of perception itself) is part of this broader process of cultural reception and production.

The discourse of the avant-garde is a key construct in this cultural history, and the popularization of the avant-garde is an evident trope in the theatre criticism of this period. The “avant-garde” is of course one of the more weighted concepts in Western cultural theory, and in fact even the European-American location of the avant-garde has been called into question by recent interventions, such as James Harding’s excellent essay “From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance.”⁹ Now, as this project focuses upon popular, mainstream Anglo-American theatre, I readily admit to working within the parameters of “Western cultural hegemony” that Harding is moving away from. My analysis is informed by Paul Mann’s (poststructural) framework for working with the concept of “avant-garde” as an aesthetic discourse.¹⁰ But we must also be able to situate artistic production amongst the cultural criticism of its own time, and in this

⁸ Louvre, “The new radicalism,” 46.

⁹ Included in *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, ed. Harding and Rouse.

¹⁰ Mann, *Theory/Death of the Avant-Garde*.

respect Peter Bürger's concept of the "historical avant-garde," theorized in his 1974 work *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, is also a useful framework for an analysis of radical and experimental (Western) artistic production in the twentieth century. Bürger's theorization of the avant-garde hinges upon his postulate that the original avant-garde movement was necessarily a European historical phenomenon, as established by his theoretical definition of its purpose and production. As Bürger points out, the original *revolutionary* aims of the historical avant-gardeists, whose endeavor endured between approximately 1916 and 1933, were disarmed by their failure to dissolve the separation of artistic praxis from the social and political spheres of modern reality.¹¹ What we are left with, in the 1960s efforts of the Anglo-American "neo" avant-garde, is a radical aesthetics, characterized by a very different productive ethos than its European, pre-World War II ancestors. Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud especially (two exceptional figures of the historical avant-garde) both played a special role in this process of recuperation and re-invention. The perception—and reception—of an avant-garde in the late 1950s through the 1960s was in part a dialogue with the legacy of an "historical" avant-garde and also a re-invention of the relationship between radical form and political intent in (post)modern culture.

As a discursive concept then, the avant-garde straddles the larger historical frameworks of modernity and postmodernity. Thus my interpretive frameworks are both synchronic, in order to analyze the critical contexts behind my case studies, and diachronic, to analyze the changing relationships between aesthetic expression and critique as a demonstration of resistance. Accordingly, some of these theoretical interventions are both looking backwards and looking forward to subsequent

¹¹ This analysis of the avant-garde reiterates the mythic structure of "revolution" in Marxist critical theory, a critique that may well be leveled at the work of Lukács, Marcuse, Adorno, and Habermas, but which is an inquiry unfortunately outside the scope of this project.

poststructural developments. In addition to arguing that a comic dialectic of history is a key strategy for a Brechtian theatre of resistance, the second founding hypothesis for my argument is that 1960s intellectual history exhibits an early postmodern sensibility that championed a particular dynamic of comedy as an appropriate method of expression and perception in Anglo-American culture. Moreover, dramatic literature—and the theatre in the larger public sphere—was a particularly important locus for those intellectuals who, beginning in the late 1950s, were developing theories of culture that broadened the concept from a purely aesthetic one to Marxist-influenced socio-political frameworks—Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall in the U.K.; Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser in France; the continuing work of Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and the scholars of the Frankfurt School in Germany; and, to a different extent, Susan Sontag and Marshall McLuhan in North America. Susan Sontag in particular is a key cultural critic whose concrete analyses of both the concept of the avant-garde and of contemporary performance bridge the strategy of cultural-studies-as-ideology-critique and the nascent articulations of postmodern, poststructuralist theories. Chapter 1 of this study establishes a provocative dialogue between the contemporaneous work of Sontag, McLuhan, and philosopher Jacques Derrida, with the aim of sketching a critical context in which we can better sense the philosophical foundations of these changes in both cultural interpretations and expectations.

While these contemporaneous complex critiques of culture and politics provide a context for interpreting the centrality of the Brechtian comic dialectic and Artaudian viscosity in the radical moments of Anglo-American commercial theatre in the first half of the 1960s, I am wary of ascribing a narrative of continuity or evolution to this history. The notion of a theoretical *influence* as a foundation for historical narrative of

the creative arts is of course a difficult field to navigate.¹² Dominick LaCapra, assessing the negotiation between intellectual and cultural history, points out that “one of the most difficult issues for interpretation...[is] how the critical and the symptomatic interact in a text or a work of art.”¹³ The change in critical methodologies from modern to postmodern is neither smooth nor direct, but it intersects in various ways with the production and reception of performance. As W.B. Worthen writes in his analysis of theatre as rhetoric, the “politics of political theater emerge not only in the themes of the drama but more searchingly in the disclosure of the working of ideology in the making of meaning in the theater, in the formation of the audience’s experience and so, in a manner of speaking, in the formation of the audience itself.”¹⁴ It is my intent to argue this history as a significant adjustment in the horizon of expectations for the mainstream Anglo-American theater-goer rather than a sea change in the institution of the theatre. And so, ultimately, we are faced with the always-incomplete work of mapping reception.

Theorizing Reception

The conscious effects (especially the visceral impact upon the spectator) of radical theatre can never be adequately documented, even when charting groundbreaking, politically aggressive performances such as those of the Living Theatre.¹⁵ Subsequently, in establishing the following theatre history, I am more interested in how a change in what constitutes “popular” within a larger community of

¹² Michel Foucault, for example, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, challenges “influence” as one of the unities of historical discourse in his philosophy of historiography.

¹³ LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” 64.

¹⁴ Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, 146.

¹⁵ See, for example, the complex navigation of historicizing intent and reception in Erika Munk’s “Only Connect: *The Living Theatre and Its Audiences*” and Alisa Solomon’s “Four Scenes of Theatrical Anarcho-Pacificism: *A Living Legacy*” (both in Harding and Rosenthal, *Restaging the Sixties*); or Mike Sell’s *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*.

readers/spectators can be seen as a radical effect itself. In this I am in agreement with Jill Dolan, who suggests in her recent *Utopia in Performance* that

Perhaps our goal shouldn't be to formulate or implement how utopian Performatives can have a social effect outside the theater, but should be to focus our activism on getting more and different kinds of people into the theater in the first place, so that they, too, might experience their affective power.¹⁶

Dolan's investment in "utopias" is grounded by the affective power of the performance of community. In this study I look closely at the evidence and power of the critical voices in the British and American public sphere as important barometers of a self-identifying community of theatre-goers. As Marvin Carlson argues in his outline of reception analysis, in the United States "it is often the case that the comments of reviewers, especially regarding unusual or experimental works, are more powerful than any other single source in structuring the way that audiences will receive the performance within the theatre."¹⁷ Likewise, Dominic Shellard asserts that while the "power of the Sunday Theatre critics was at its zenith between 1947 and 1962, with movements being bolstered as well as documented by their observations,"¹⁸ British theatre critics continued to influence strongly the realm of theatrical production and reception even as their involvement metamorphized away "from being that of a chronicler of the process to that of a participant within it,"¹⁹ and their collective role adapted into a "new brand of acerbic sixties theatre critics."²⁰ My analysis of a Jaussian "horizon of expectations" is thus largely dependent upon an engagement with the critical response to these productions, as evidence of a theatre-

¹⁶ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 170.

¹⁷ Carlson, "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance," 95.

¹⁸ Shellard, 19.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Ibid., 109.

going community and also as proof of the discursive importance of theatre in the public sphere.

Summary

The historical avant-garde rebelled against both art and politics, attempting revolution through performance. In the following chapters, I will explore the influence of the radical aesthetics of Brecht and, ultimately, Artaud as well, within this Anglo-American theatre trade-route in the early 1960s. Close readings reveal an emphasis on comedy and a burgeoning postmodern sensibility in tandem with the growing circulation of Brecht. This is not to say, however, that all commercial Brechtian theatre had a radical quality or can be labeled as “postmodern.” For one thing, the embrace of political dialectics in mainstream productions is both enabled by and handicapped by its capitalist system. The direct application of Brecht’s dramaturgy to the mainstream production apparatus, without a consideration of the historical, institutional differences, resulted in a “diluted” Brecht, a Brechtian fable created within the Cold War framework of containment. Nevertheless, the Brechtian influence upon the popular theatre of London and New York, I argue, did create a radical effect upon the horizon of expectations within the commercial theatre. Those mainstream theatre-goers who looked forward to an evening at the theatre were ultimately confronted with their own complicity as consumers of war-as-entertainment. The discomfiture with primetime war, of course, led to genuine political action as the decade came to a close. Perhaps, in revisiting the theatre of the 1960s, we might reconsider the long-term significance of those earlier evenings out in Midtown Manhattan and London’s West End.

CHAPTER 1
CRITICAL HISTORIES: THE COMIC COLD WAR CLASH
OF THE AVANT-GARDE AND POSTMODERNISM

Introduction

In the 1984 essay “Periodizing the 60s,” Marxist critic and theorist of postmodernity Fredric Jameson looks back at the decade to put into dialogue “the history of philosophy, revolutionary political theory and practice, cultural production, and economic cycles”²¹ as part of his larger project of critiquing the culture of “late capitalism.” Expanding this study in his 1991 book *Postmodernism*, he qualifies the term “late capitalism” as containing indications of its own structural significance, for “its temporal index seems already to direct attention to changes in the quotidian and on the cultural level as such...it seems to obligate you in advance to talk about cultural phenomena at least in business terms if not in those of political economy.”²² In this larger work, he reviews this structural transformation as an economic preparation of the 1950s, leading to a “generational rupture” of a transformed “psychic *habitus*” occurring in the 1960s.²³ In his essay focusing on this historical moment of the 1960s, he considers intellectual history as part of this systemic restructuring, arguing that the “guerilla warfare” of ideology critique was an instance of transforming philosophy into a material practice, “a development that cannot fully be appreciated until it is replaced in the context of a general mutation of culture through this period.”²⁴ As Jameson looks at intellectual history through the lens of cultural mutation, so too can

²¹ Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” 179.

²² Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xxi.

²³ Ibid., xx. Jameson’s use of the concept of a *habitus* is informed by the cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu, who established the concept in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980). The “habitus,” as defined by Bourdieu, is “conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence...systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures” (*Logic of Practice*, 53). The *habitus* is analogous to the “false consciousness of ideology” in Marxist philosophy.

²⁴ Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” 194.

we reciprocally chart transformations in cultural categories and hierarchies by the contradictions illuminated through critical theory. This chapter investigates philosophical and cultural critiques as an historical context, arguing that they gesture towards a nascent postmodern hypothesis that comedy is an essential aesthetic strategy in an age of industrial simulacra and consumption, a strategy that becomes apparent in the successful radical productions on the mainstream New York and London stages, as evidenced in the theatre history of this larger project.²⁵

The reappearance and reinvention of the avant-garde as an artistic concept is central to this process, and thus I begin with a survey of the different locations of “avant-garde” within theories of modernity and postmodernity. The “avant-garde” remained a lightning-rod for cultural criticism throughout the decade, most especially in the theatre; in fact, the cover story for a 1969 issue of the popular American magazine *Esquire*, “The Final Decline and Total Collapse of the American Avant-Garde,” argues that “[m]ost of the activity takes place in the theatre.”²⁶ The theatre in the 1960s was a particularly important location for the arbiters and analysts of cultural change in both Britain and in the U.S. As Alan Sinfield points out in a analysis of cultural change in Britain, when charting “the production of literature, materially and as a concept...[t]heatre is the most social of literary forms, for in its modern urban manifestation a play needs good initial audiences to survive.”²⁷ In this chapter, I am putting into dialogue three disparate but nevertheless related thinkers who each, in a different manner, turned to performance to establish a nascent, postmodern re-

²⁵ I am not including the burgeoning popularity of stand-up comedy at this moment, although the political influence of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce upon popular culture is definitely connected to this project and warrants further study. For a history of stand-up comedy in the 1960’s, see Gerald Nachman’s *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950’s and 1960’s* (New York: Knopf, 2003). Philip Auslander, in “Comedy About the Failure of Comedy,” makes a disheartening argument that radical stand-up comedy was one of the casualties of postmodernism, and that the subversive counterculture of sixties stand-up has become impossible: now we can only have “comedy about the failure of comedy.”

²⁶ *Esquire*, “The Final Decline and Total Collapse of the American Avant-Garde.”

²⁷ Sinfield, “The theatre and its audiences,” 173.

consideration of comedy in aesthetic perception. Two of these intellectuals—Jacques Derrida and Marshall McLuhan—were critiquing philosophical and anthropological methodologies, respectively; the third, Susan Sontag, serves as a vital link between the intellectual re-inventions of hermeneutics in the 1960s and the contemporary assessment of concrete artistic production. All three left a vital imprint on the different critical methodologies that came out of this changing moment, and reflect the relationship between the avant-garde, postmodernism, and comedy that informs the subsequent cultural history of 1960s Anglo-American mainstream political theatre.

Schemas of Cultural History/Theory

There are different historical approaches to the relationship between the concept of an artistic avant-garde and the burst of experimental art (especially performance and visual art) that began in the late 1950s and was part of the general public discourse by the 1960s. Matei Calinescu, for one, in his analysis of the *Faces of Modernity*, identifies a “Crisis of the Avant-Garde’s Concept in the 1960’s.”²⁸ Calinescu points out that literary and cultural critics of the time, such as Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Leslie Fiedler, and Irving Howe, were already observing that “the avant-garde found itself failing through a stupendous, involuntary success.”²⁹ Calinescu’s complete chapter on postmodernism in the revised edition of his book reveals a clearer view of the break between avant-garde as a symptom of modernity and the revised socio-historical-cultural symptoms of postmodernity. The connection—both in theoretical outlines and in historical trajectory—between a “neo” avant-garde and postmodernism is largely based on the important aesthetic theories of the avant-garde established by Renato Poggioli³⁰ and, even more importantly, by Peter Bürger.³¹

²⁸ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*. This book was originally published as *Faces of Modernity*, without the final section on Postmodernism, in 1977.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁰ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Poggioli’s book was first published (in Italian) in 1962.

³¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger’s book was first published (in German) in 1974.

Bürger's 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is one of the key post-1960s critical texts that theorize this phenomenon in twentieth-century aesthetics.³² He establishes the concept of a "historical avant-garde" which played out in a specific moment from World War I through the 1930s as a response to a particular European political and social environment. I turn here to Bürger's theorization because it historicizes the avant-garde in tandem within other theoretical frameworks of Western cultural history, such as the experiential frames of modernity³³ and the hegemonic operations of capitalist systems.³⁴ In this schema of aesthetic theory/history, the pre-WWII avant-garde (which was realized throughout various "movements," predominantly Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism) was a particular historical phenomenon which could subsequently be recycled only in form, not in function.

The dissolution of the historical avant-garde was realized by its reappropriation after the Second World War into an increasingly heterogeneous culture industry that reinforced the separation of artistic change from political change, a late-capitalist system of cultural production theorized by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.³⁵ While the institutionalized culture industry reflects the homogenizing effect of a capitalist ideology, as argued by Adorno and Horkheimer, I use the qualifier "heterogeneous" to indicate the vast range of formal characteristics that can be accommodated by a cultural system wherein the production of artistic expression is driven above all by the need for its own marketability. The

³² In fact, Bürger's own analysis of the social function of what he terms the "neo-avant-garde" can be seen as a blueprint for the postmodern connections made by subsequent aesthetic critics: "The Neo-avant-garde, which stages for a second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition, becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever" (61).

³³ Habermas, "Modernity vs. Postmodernity," 11.

³⁴ Although these keywords are not specifically referenced in Bürger's analysis, we can synthesize his aesthetic history with the Gramscian theory of hegemony, developed by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall as a key framework for marxian cultural studies.

³⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In his later essay "Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno explains that "We replaced that expression ['mass culture'] with 'culture industry' in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates; that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves" (98).

transformation of intellectual and artistic expressions into commodities first and foremost compels art, no matter its formal qualities, to enter the homogenous realm of commodity markets, where “each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement.”³⁶ In order to achieve this self-sustaining system, the culture industry is predicated by homogeneity of production and of Enlightenment ideology: “Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together. Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm.”³⁷

This theoretical framework for capitalist culture explains the appropriation of the historical avant-garde into general artistic production. The ironic failure of the Enlightenment, as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer, is the estrangement of thought and perception from production and daily life, an estrangement which the historical avant-garde attempted, unsuccessfully, to obliterate. Thus the resurrection of an “avant-garde aesthetic” in the fifties and sixties can only be seen as a shadow, a “neo” avant-garde that cannot resurrect the theoretical identity of the original avant-garde project because of the dissolution of its ideological potential. “Although the neo-avant-gardes proclaim the same goals as the representatives of the historical avant-garde movements to some extent, the demand that art be reintegrated in the praxis of life within the existing society can no longer be seriously made after the failure of avant-gardist intentions,” writes Bürger.³⁸ This theory/history of a “neo-avant-garde,” which patterns itself after the historical phenomenon in its adoption of formal techniques—mass production (or at least rejection of the artist-as-genius-individual); shocking the audience; embrace of technological means and innovations—opens up instead a new historical relationship between aesthetic categorization and social function.

³⁶ Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” 100.

³⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.

³⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* p. 109fn4.

Building off of the avant-garde theorizations of Bürger, Renato Poggioli, Calinescu, and others, Paul Mann's *Theory/Death of the Avant-Garde* is a poststructural approach towards the concept of the "avant-garde," arguing that the avant-garde is a discursive formation, constituted through perennial theoretical interventions. Mann's own intervention points out that theory, death, recuperation, and ironic contrast are essential to the discourse of the "avant-garde," no matter how the concept is being used and applied.³⁹ The post-WWII phenomenon of avant-garde death and resurrection, as described by Mann, included "consolidation and recuperation of the mode of anti-art"; "supersaturation and therefore the crisis of recuperation"; and "decentering" and postmodern reorganization.⁴⁰ Hal Foster's close study of experimentation in 1970s and 1980s plastic arts serves as an example of Mann's argument of discursive cycles, for Foster argues in *The Return of the Real* that the neo-avant-garde is a postmodern rearticulation of the (modern) historical avant-garde.⁴¹ Foster does not engage with the appropriation of the historical avant-garde by the culture industry, however, focusing rather on the narrow American art world of museums and galleries. By avoiding the question of bourgeois systems of production and consumption that were one of the targets of the historical avant-garde, Foster can focus upon a synthesis of formal elements in the visual arts, which he approaches through the lens of the (Marxian-influenced) poststructural theories of Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Jameson.

Richard Murphy draws similar parallels between the avant-garde and postmodernism in his exploration of the relationship between expressionism and postmodernity. Through a complex reading of Jean-François Lyotard's theory of the sublime, Murphy arrives at the argument that since the avant-garde's assault on

³⁹ Mann, *Theory/Death of the Avant-Garde*.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 65.

⁴¹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 20-21.

bourgeois aesthetics and morality (especially in its Expressionist manifestations) resulted only in institutional tensions between it and high/mass culture formations, “then in the case of the avant-garde/postmodern by contrast, the inscription into their texts of an awareness of the limits of utopian representation is simultaneously an indication of an essential and defining insight.”⁴² If this process of resistance is, in part, a continuation of the experiential project of Modernity, Murphy nevertheless points out the expansion of ideology-critique in the post-avant-garde milieu: “its creation of a set of counter-discourses, a new rhetoric freed from normative institutional constraints, is itself expressive of a need still prevalent in postmodernity.”⁴³ This argument re-frames the “utopian” nature of the historical avant-garde’s project as a postmodern potential for an infinite plurality of the terms inherited from the legacies of humanism, liberalism, and the Enlightenment. Like Foster, Murphy optimistically interprets the cultural echoes of the historical avant-garde “as an experiment whose impact is still being felt in the present, in the culture of postmodernity.”⁴⁴

Also like Foster, however, Murphy’s adaptation of Bürger’s avant-garde theory to a synthesis of postmodernity does not engage with the historical changes in production and reception behind the avant-garde’s demise. Again, the “involuntary success” of the avant-garde, as Calinescu puts it, was its ironic assimilation into culture industry production beginning in the 1950s and culminating in the 1960s. Foster’s argument regarding the plastic arts and Murphy’s analysis of expressionist aesthetics, while pointing towards a postmodern interpretation of avant-garde aesthetics, do not excavate the production and reception of avant-garde performance

⁴² Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, 284.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

as entertainment.⁴⁵ In this larger project, I argue that the “awareness of the limits of utopian representation,” identified by Murphy as the subversive potential in avant-garde/postmodern art, is also apparent in the popular recuperation of the historical avant-garde’s legacy in the mainstream New York and London theatre worlds of the early 1960s.

The 1969 *Esquire* article explains that the avant-garde (and its demise) takes place in the theatre “or what we used to call the theatre but now call the New Theatre,” which, in their analysis, includes Artaudian performance, the “Dada-Zen” Happenings of John Cage et al., and the “revolutionary battle orders of the New Left.” Sally Banes adeptly analyzes the origins of these performance movements in her history of the early-1960s radical performances in the greater artistic community of Greenwich Village, where she charts the works of Fluxus; the Judson Poets’ Theater; the Living Theatre; La Mama; Allan Kaprow; visual artists Warhol, Oldenburg, and Robert Rauschenberg; dancer-choreographers Yvonne Rainer, Judith Dunn, and James Waring; and others.⁴⁶ In her analysis, these radical artists exhibited a “commitment to the democratic ethos,” a political position that developed out of a new phase in the Cold War, a war that “was being recast as a cultural competition rather than a military one.”⁴⁷ The “political” thrust of these artists here reached something as close as possible to the original project of the historical avant-garde, in its manifesto to smash the boundaries between art and everyday life: as Banes points out, “radical” New York performances included ironing clothing and shaving legs. “In their very banality,

⁴⁵ Although Murphy’s textual examples include a sensitive treatment of expressionist drama and cinema, the relationship between the formal characteristics of the works and their influence upon an (critical) aesthetic of postmodernity does not address establish a concrete connection between the expressionist tendencies of the 1920’s and 1930’s and the popular culture of the 1960’s.

⁴⁶ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*.

⁴⁷ Banes, 5-6. Banes certainly does not dismiss the military magnitude of the Cold War, of course, but she points out that the heat of Cuban missile crisis of 1962 did lead to the Nuclear Test Ban treaty of 1963, and pursues her cultural analysis in the context of the post-Cuban missile crisis “Pax Americana.”

these activities became charged with meaning,” Banes argues,⁴⁸ their radical nature stemming from their self-conscious existentialism. And yet when put into the greater picture of First World society, the perpetual commodification of such banality through publicity must continue further in order to continue the radical statement. Only a few such experimental artists continued the performance of banality to its grossest state of commercial confrontation, Andy Warhol being the most legendary.

But where might we locate a concrete political intervention in a revised, postmodern avant-garde sensibility? Fredric Jameson, defining the postmodern as “the disengagement of a fundamental theme or meaning...a structure or sign flow which resists meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of the emergence of themes as such in that sense,”⁴⁹ seeks out the political ramifications of this postmodern sensibility as it functions within the ideological apparatus of late capitalism, a process which he has traced back to this moment of the 1960s. The “new political art (if it is possible at all),” Jameson writes,

will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at the present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.⁵⁰

The postmodern sensibility, characterized by a dynamic of irony, offers a method of resistance—this “capacity to act and struggle”—through its refusal of resolution and fixed meaning. Avant-garde aesthetics proved to be a key method for expressing simultaneous resistance and incorporation: the postmodern dialectic of irresolvable irony.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 91-92.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 54.

Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* provides a particularly useful analysis of this relationship between the politics of the historical avant-garde and of its later popular manifestations in Western culture that emerged at this historical moment.⁵¹ Huyssen argues for a "hidden dialectic" between the avant-garde and mass culture, suggesting that we re-investigate the manner in which what was historically revolutionary becomes re-framed and standardized. As Huyssen points out, the technological advances that were inspirational and central to the avant-garde's praxis also ensured its assimilation into a mass-produced and mass-distributed culture machine, and it is "the culture industry, not the avantgarde, which succeeded in transforming everyday life in the 20th century."⁵² This symbiotic relationship between the two creative schemas—a mass-produced industrial culture and radical avant-garde culture—is part of the discourse of theory and death that Paul Mann traces in his analysis of the avant-garde.

The second important point Huyssen brings forth is the consideration of American cultural systems in opposition to the Continental European contexts from which the theory of the avant-garde is drawn. Huyssen sees in American early postmodernism (the 1960s) the remnants of the historical avant-garde's challenge to the segregation of art and everyday life in the postmodern attempt to bridge High Art and mass culture. The "neo-avant-garde" performances in the 1960s, such as those analyzed by Banes, did attempt "to bridge the gap between stage and audience and experimented with new forms of immediacy and spontaneity."⁵³ But these performances emerged in America, playing out in a different horizon of expectations. As Huyssen notes, a "major difference between American and European writers in the 1960's is that the European writers, artists, and intellectuals then were much more

⁵¹ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 164.

aware of the increasing co-option of all modernist and avant-garde art by the culture industry.”⁵⁴ In the American context, critics sought to re-open both the avant-garde and popular culture for a potential resistance to the standardizing middlebrow sensibility, which inculcated a generalized political stance of nationalistic, Cold War liberal-democracy.

A survey of some of these influential American critics reveals the fear that this middlebrow, bourgeois culture industry was more nefarious than overt mass culture due to its very claim to serious cultural influence.⁵⁵ In the early 1960’s, both Dwight MacDonald and Leslie Fiedler published sharper appraisal of American cultural systems in general, although there is, as Huyssen notes, a tendency to blur the distinctions between avant-garde and modernism. MacDonald’s essay “Masscult and Midcult,”⁵⁶ for example, is both an explanation of the workings of mass culture and a polemic against the perhaps even more insidious “Midcult,” the “middlebrow compromise” of High Culture that can be available for everyone. MacDonald’s critical view presents the paradox of liberal cultural equality: the advent of popular education and artistic access has made the openness of culture a democratic choice, and the “blurring of this line, however desirable politically, has had unfortunate results culturally.”⁵⁷ The middlebrow sensibility mandates that respectable culture is

⁵⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁵ The criticism of “mass culture” in America has a significant history in the 20th century, and the 1957 publication of the collection *Mass Culture* includes writings by both Frankfurt School-based critics (Adorno, Kracauer, Lowenthal) and also well-established figures in North American socio-cultural criticism such as David Riesman, Irving Howe, Robert Warshow, Clement Greenberg, Marshall McLuhan, Henry Popkin, MacDonald, and Fiedler.

⁵⁶ Dwight MacDonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” in *Against the American Grain*, 3-79. An early, shorter form of an essay on “A Theory of Popular Culture” appeared in *Politics* in 1944; a revised version as “A Theory of Mass Culture” appeared in *Diogenes* in 1953 and was re-printed in Rosenberg’s and White’s 1957 collection *Mass Culture*. The final, much longer manifestation which expands the critique to middlebrow culture, appeared as “Masscult and Midcult” in *Partisan Review* in 1960 and was reprinted in MacDonald’s Random House collection in 1962.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 34.

something that one is morally obligated to consume—a processed commodity.⁵⁸

Leslie Fiedler's 1955 essay "The Middle Against Both Ends"⁵⁹ also points out the pervasiveness of middlebrow culture as a powerful force that engulfs and attempts to annihilate both the "vulgar" techniques of mass culture and the "experimental" challenges of High Culture. American criticism, interestingly, approached the avant-garde impulse in the context of an American capitalist hegemony of a "middlebrow sensibility," discovering anew the failure of the historical avant-garde to smash the boundaries between the art world, political action, and everyday life.

In Fiedler's 1964 essay "The Death of Avant-Garde Literature," he argues that the cultural enthusiasm of the middlebrow audience has led to the "technical exhaustion" of the avant-garde, and so he suggests a return to the use of ideas as a means of challenging the aesthetic sensibilities of the spectator/cultural consumer.⁶⁰ The different agendas of the three cultural arenas are described as lowbrow=identification; middlebrow=protest; highbrow=insult. Fiedler feels that now the only possibility for aesthetic provocation is through actively offending through content, rather than relying upon formal techniques which will only be incorporated into earnest expressions of liberal-democratic protest—that precarious Leftist dance between the "Scylla of anti-Stalinism and the Charybdis of McCarthyism," as David Savran has put it.⁶¹

⁵⁸Ibid., 61. Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* offer historical studies of this establishment of American middlebrow culture as a system of standardizing and consuming "high culture" in the name of edification and moral/social responsibility, following Lawrence Levine's seminal study *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. David Savran, in "Middlebrow Anxiety," offers a smart critique of the continuing polemic against the "middlebrow" in American cultural hierarchies (in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*).

⁵⁹Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, Vol. II*, 415-428. The essay was originally published in *Encounter*, August 1955.

⁶⁰Fiedler, "The Death of Avant-Garde Literature," in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, Vol. II*, 454-460. The essay was originally published in the *New York Herald Tribune Magazine* on May 17, 1964.

⁶¹Savran, *Queer Sort of Materialism*, 4.

Fiedler's speculation of offensive and insulting content is provocatively suggestive of an Artaudian aesthetic of "cruelty," which shall be explored below. A concurrent American critic who recognized the applicability of Artaud's historical avant-garde work to the present was Susan Sontag, who observed in her analysis of the 1962 "Happenings" that they were in accordance with "Artaud's prescription for a spectacle which will eliminate the stage, that is the distance between spectators and performers, and 'will physically envelope the spectator.'"⁶² Sontag's cultural criticism of the time offers us an alternative to the strategy of hierarchies. Jameson notes in *Postmodernism* that Sontag's sharp critiques of the early 1960s aesthetic realm were prophetic articulations of a postmodern approach to late-capitalist cultural production.⁶³ Sontag argues for a cultural practice that encompasses the techniques of aesthetic expression as part of a larger, active experiential process, rather than a concerned analysis of moral and aesthetic valuation, and she serves as an important link between the academic realm of Continental aesthetic philosophy and contemporary American performance.

Susan Sontag: American cultural criticism, Continental-style

Sontag's first book of critical essays, *Against Interpretation*, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in January 1966; most of the essays had been previously published between 1961 and 1965 in intellectual journals and supplements such as *Partisan Review*, *Evergreen Review*, and *The Nation*. The collected essays reflect a critical endeavor to chart a contemporary system of aesthetic judgment: judgment that functions without categorizations or evaluations of merit, but rather operates through a historical sense of sensory impact. Sontag accepts the use of labels (from "avant-garde" to "camp") as a critical tool for historical contextualization, but her own

⁶² Sontag, "Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation*, 274.

⁶³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 92.

analysis focuses rather on the affective values of the literary, cinematic, and theatrical arts as an ethical project. Upon her 1966 arrival into the world of large-scale publishing, Sontag was quickly identified as a catalytic figure between the “avant-garde” and the “popular,” and (in an important parallel) between the “European” and the “American.” Reviews even clarified the collection at hand with titles like “Jeanne d’Avant-Garde and the ‘New Sensibility,’”⁶⁴ “Sharp Look at the Avant-Garde,”⁶⁵ and “L’avant-garde new-yorkaise.”⁶⁶ Sontag’s background in European philosophy and aesthetic theory became a touchstone for an American audience that had learned (as MacDonald and Fiedler pointed out) to appropriate the “avant-garde” as a respectable mark of “culture.” The combination of aesthetic theory and an interest in popular culture was noted by reviewers with interest, and interpreted as a marriage between European and American “sensibilities”: Michele Murray, for example, wrote in a review appearing in Catholic print syndicates that “Miss Sontag’s special value, however, in dealing with art built on such premises is her training in philosophy, especially in 20th century philosophy...Indeed, she seldom deals with specifically American art, although her sensibility is American and does not pretend to be otherwise.”⁶⁷

In a 1965 talk entitled “The Avant-Garde and Contemporary Literature,” delivered to the New York Library Association, Sontag (on the cusp of national recognition as a cultural critic) engages head-on with the theoretical assumptions behind the increasingly-used label “avant-garde.” She questions the concept of artistic “progress,” especially when it results in systems of hierarchical valuation, suggesting

⁶⁴ Donal Henahan, Chicago *Daily News*, Jan. 29, 1966 (Susan Sontag Papers, UCLA Research and Special Collections).

⁶⁵ Anthony Powell, London *Daily Telegraph*, March 30, 1967 (Susan Sontag Papers).

⁶⁶ *Le Monde*, April 13, 1968 (Susan Sontag Papers).

⁶⁷ Michele Murray, untitled review appearing in the *Kansas City Catholic* and *The National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 9, 1966 (Susan Sontag Papers).

instead an approach that scopes out the *affective*—and thus both social and ethical—implications of artistic projects. Sontag, trained as a philosopher, was familiar with a Hegelian-influenced dialectical-historical approach to aesthetic theory, as is evidenced via a close reading of her essays “Against Interpretation” and “On Style,” as well as by her use of the works of Adorno, Benjamin, and Lukács. As a public intellectual and art critic, she did not see her role as that of a warrior against the mechanisms of an American culture industry, but rather created her own mission to investigate the sensory and cognitive possibilities within artworks. It is perhaps this desire to break down the separation between artistic expression and intellectual conviction that makes Sontag “avant-garde.” As a cultural critic she was drawn to works that experiment and open up new articulations of evaluating experience. While her essay “On Style” takes into consideration historicity as a contingency of aesthetic experience (“the visibility of styles is itself a product of historical consciousness”⁶⁸), she rejects a Hegelian model of teleological artistic development. Rather than dissect art-works with a separately analyzed model of socio-political assumptions, Sontag wants “to expose and clarify the theoretical assumptions underlying specific judgments and tastes.”⁶⁹ Instead of attacking hierarchies of the mass, the elite, and the middlebrow, Sontag embarks upon a curious reception theory based upon her own knowledge of artistic history. In this regard, her critical project is much indebted to that of Walter Benjamin, whom she acknowledged as a great influence.⁷⁰

Sontag concludes her essay “Against Interpretation” (originally published in *Evergreen Review* in 1964) with an aphorism: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an

⁶⁸ Susan Sontag, “On Style,” in *Against Interpretation*, 18.

⁶⁹ Susan Sontag, Preface to *Against Interpretation*, x.

⁷⁰ Her reverence for Benjamin is expressed directly in her essay on Lukács: “Benjamin is a great critic (it is he who deserves the title ‘the only major German literary critic of our epoch’)...Benjamin shows us what Lukács as a literary critic might have been” (*Against Interpretation*, 89).

erotics of art.”⁷¹ The entire collection stresses the importance of what is seen, felt, and heard. “On Style” continues this approach, contrasting the difference between a New Critical approach to style-as-content and Sontag’s more comparative approach to the sensory impact effected through “styles.” The trick to interpreting “against interpretation” is to avoid the pitfalls of absolute valuation—such as decadent or offensive—and to interpret rather with an acceptance of the relativity of sensory affect. This is not to say that the aesthetic experience disavows any claims to moral sensibility, but rather that the two are wedded in their mutual infinite contingencies:

Of course, works of art...refer to the real world—to our knowledge, to our experience, to our values...[The] knowledge we gain through art is *an experience of the form or style of knowing something*, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment) in itself...For the problem of art versus morality is a pseudo-problem. The distinction itself is a trap; its continued plausibility rests on not putting the ethical into question, but only the aesthetic.⁷²

The essays in *Against Interpretation* reveal the critic’s attempt to question the aesthetic (and ethical) dynamics that contribute to the way we evaluate our experiences.

The collection is also largely grounded on case studies of film and live performance, for Sontag began her career as a public intellectual as a cultural critic of contemporary literature, film, and theatre in publications such as the *New York Review of Books*, *Book Week*, *Commentary*, and *Partisan Review*. It is interesting to note that while Sontag primarily focused on film, photography, and illness in her later writings, she did theatre, directing *Waiting for Godot* in 1993 in Sarajevo. In her early work, she explained the work of Eugène Ionesco and Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy*⁷³ as well as the filmmakers of the French New Wave (Bresson, Resnais, Godard) and

⁷¹ Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation*, 14.

⁷² “On Style,” [emphasis added] 21-23.

⁷³ Hochhuth’s notorious play *Der Stellvertreter* (1963) was first produced in London and New York in 1964 as *The Deputy*. Subsequent English versions sometimes translate it as *The Representative*.

contemporary performance phenomena in general, such as the attraction of science-fiction disaster stories (“The Imagination of Disaster”) and Happenings. In these close studies, Sontag utilizes her thorough knowledge of both French and German aesthetic theory and philosophy to illuminate the critical legacy behind their aesthetics. For instance, she notes how Lionel Abel’s *The Death of Tragedy* is “in the grand continental tradition of meditation on the tribulations of subjectivity and self-consciousness, inaugurated by the romantic poets and Hegel and continued by Nietzsche, Spengler, the early Lukács, and Sartre.”⁷⁴ She puts Hochhuth’s drama about the collusion of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust into dialogue with Hannah Arendt’s recent book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, asserting that “as the trial is preeminently a theatrical form, the theater is a courtroom...[and by] far the most celebrated of all the works of art which take up the same functions of historical memory served by the Eichmann trial is *The Deputy*,” although she goes on in her analysis to admit that Hochhuth’s work is “not playwriting of the highest order.”⁷⁵ In charting these contemporary developments in literature, performance, and film, her central interest is always the aesthetics of affect rather than another articulation of the form/content dialectic, and her case studies are part of her larger project to articulate a cultural/aesthetic theory of “sensibility.”

For instance, the 1965 essay “One Culture and the New Sensibility,”⁷⁶ is of particular interest due to its consideration of technology and technological advancement in the analysis of artistic expression. In this essay, as in “Against Interpretation,” the influence of Benjamin’s essay “Work of Art in the Age of

⁷⁴ Susan Sontag, “The death of tragedy,” in *Against Interpretation*, 132-139. This review of Abel’s book was originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1963.

⁷⁵ Susan Sontag, “Reflections on *The Deputy*,” in *Against Interpretation*, 124-131. The essay originally appeared in *Book Week* in 1964.

⁷⁶ Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” in *Against Interpretation*, 293-304. This essay was originally published in the magazine *Mademoiselle*.

Technological Reproducibility” upon Sontag’s thinking is evident.⁷⁷ Her references to the affective importance of mobility; speed; crowdedness; and technologically-driven distribution are reminiscent of the critiques of modern life of Georg Simmel, Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, and similar to the summaries given by American critics of mass culture such as MacDonald. Rather than attempting to interpret the meaning of the artwork via a categorical analysis or a socio-comparative analysis, Sontag describes a new critical sensibility which would celebrate the plurality of expressive possibilities inherent in what we designate as art. An anti-interpretation would seek out and ponder the immediate, irreducible, sensuous potential of artistic expression and reception, as opposed to the “open aggressiveness” of the modern style of interpretation, which “excavates,” “destroys,” and seeks a “subtext which is the true one” is “the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’”⁷⁸ The “New Sensibility” of the title is one of playfulness, in which the historical potential for sensory awareness is opened up, and Sontag notes the thin line between “boredom” and “pleasure” that is a result of the sensuous experimentation in modern arts. “Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of most educated people...our sensibilities may take time to catch up with the forms of pleasure that art in a given time may offer.”⁷⁹ One could perhaps go so far as to say that Sontag’s critical project was a utilitarian one, but not in the sense that

⁷⁷ Take, for example, the commencement of “Against Interpretation” with the reminder that “The earliest *experience* of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical: art was an instrument of ritual” (3); an even more overt reference is obvious in “New Sensibility”: “Art, which arose in human society as a magical-religious operation...has in our own time arrogated to itself a new function—neither religious, nor serving a secularized religious function, nor merely secular or profane...[Art] is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility” (296).

⁷⁸ Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 6-7.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 303.

she sought to evaluate the concrete social benefits of artistic expression. The social use-value of aesthetic criticism lies in the attempt to locate the sensible benefits of aesthetic expression. Sontag's approach to the sensibility of culture in general is one based upon an erotics of reception rather than of categorizations or quantifications.

Andreas Huyssen notes the postmodern direction of the 1960s cultural critics, Sontag and Fiedler in particular.⁸⁰ Although "from an American perspective the postmodernism of the 1960s had some of the makings of a genuine avantgarde movement," nevertheless Huyssen reminds us that the "American postmodernism of the 1960s was both: an American avantgarde *and* the endgame of international avant-gardism,"⁸¹ the process of death and recuperation argued by Paul Mann. Leslie Fiedler expressed this endgame explicitly in his 1964 essay on the death of avant-garde literature, pointing out that "with the aid of the mass media, anti-fashion becomes fashion among us at a rate that bewilders critics and writers alike"; in ladies' magazines and "sophisticated slicks" (like *Esquire*), the "tragicomedy of accepted alienation is played out monthly."⁸² By the end of the 1960's, Fiedler (like Sontag) had come upon a new realization of the culture machine in general and the role of the cultural critic within it. Fiedler examines the ubiquity of self-reflection in the postmodern environment, and his concrete examples drawn from popular fiction, film, television (especially critiques of the Western, Science Fiction, and Pornography) describe a culture of simulation.⁸³ The rejection of an aesthetics of progress—admitting that the avant-garde is no longer "in advance" of anything—makes criticism an active rather than re-active process, an argument that certainly supports Fredric

⁸⁰ Huyssen, *The Great Divide*, 161.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 194-195.

⁸² Leslie Fiedler, "The Death of Avant-Garde Literature," 455.

⁸³ Fiedler does not engage with Continental theory in the manner of Sontag, but his cultural analyses of the 1960's certainly describe the commodity-culture that is more highly theorized in Baudrillard's works on the consumer society and simulacra.

Jameson's perception that critical developments were part of a general mutation of dominant culture. Criticism, Fiedler remarks in 1969's "Cross the Border—Close the Gap," has invaded everything and has "threatened to swallow up all other forms of literature."⁸⁴ Describing the work of Canadian intellectual Marshall McLuhan, Fiedler speculates that now "criticism is literature or it is nothing."⁸⁵ Sontag herself often refers to McLuhan in her collected essays, and she recommends Marshall McLuhan as an analyst of the sensibility of contemporary aesthetics, a critic who better articulates the contemporary need for an appreciation of a sensory-aesthetic driven culture; in the rapidly expanding aesthetic potentialities of contemporary life, "the new sensibility understands art as the extension of life—this being understood as the representation of (new) modes of vivacity." Huyssen, in his analysis of the slow shift to postmodern criticism, also points out that McLuhan was one of the "early advocates of postmodernism [who] shared the technological optimism of segments of the 1920s avantgarde."⁸⁶ Accordingly, we can see McLuhan's innovative aesthetic theory of this moment as part of the larger dialogue between the legacy of the avant-garde and the burgeoning postmodern dynamics of late-capitalism.

I would like to suggest that the early critical theory of Jacques Derrida complements these interventions in Anglo-American aesthetic theory, the sociological media studies of McLuhan and the artistic/cultural criticism of Sontag. Huyssen, for example, advises against accepting *de facto* a symmetry between the postmodern art of the 1970's and 1980's and the simultaneous flourishing of poststructural critics in the American academy. His argument instead is that "rather than offering a *theory of postmodernity* and developing an analysis of contemporary culture, French theory

⁸⁴ Fiedler, "Cross the Border—Close the Gap," in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, Vol. II*, 462. The essay was originally published in *Playboy* magazine in December 1969.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

⁸⁶ Huyssen, 193.

provides us primarily with an *archaeology of modernity*, a theory of modernism at the stage of its exhaustion.”⁸⁷ This suggestion is a useful one, and allows us to approach the (philosophical) critical project of Derrida in its relation to the cultural critics who were examining the role of aesthetic experience and cultural production through a nascent postmodern sensibility in the 1960s. McLuhan and Derrida, in their significantly different styles, are key figures of this burgeoning critical moment when the use-value of artistic-aesthetic experimentation was coming into question. The contemporaneous critical endeavors of Susan Sontag, an admirer of both Derrida’s and McLuhan’s work, reveals a direct rapport between their theoretical projects, opening up a new analytical framework for considering the transformation of the avant-garde project via a dawning postmodern sensibility.

Intellectual History and the Perception of Experience: Derrida and McLuhan

In correspondence, Derrida expressed his affinity for Sontag’s work, and he was appreciative of the rapport between their critical sensitivities. Reading *Against Interpretation*, Derrida noted the similarity between his deconstruction of Western metaphysics and the American cultural critic’s challenge to the older structures of aesthetic valuation. “I feel like I’m in friendly company,” he writes appreciatively,

and not just because it is a book that is oriented towards Europe and France, but also because the themes are new and destructive and liberating. All that you say about an art directed since the dawn of the West by the concept of mimesis interests me particularly: particularly at this moment because I am working in this very area—an enigmatic conception of imitation but also, moreover, of “supplement” and the “metaphysical supplement” that Nietzsche provides.⁸⁸

It is worth considering the connection Derrida perceived between his investigation of the supplement effect and Sontag’s assault upon a mimetic evaluation of art-works.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 209.

⁸⁸ Handwritten letter from Jacques Derrida to Susan Sontag, February 12, 1966 (Susan Sontag Papers). My translation from the French.

Sontag's argument against interpretation is an argument *de facto* against mimetic theory, a mimetic theory that has adjusted over time, but remains entrenched in Western interpretation: "when most artists and critics have discarded the theory of art as representation of an outer reality in favor of the theory of art as subjective expression, the main feature of the mimetic theory persists...[The theory,] as it's usually put today, [is] that a work of art by definition says something."⁸⁹ Sontag resists a hermeneutics of art, an approach that seeks to uncover and analyze an immanent meaning, tracing instead the ineffability of meaning, for she was driven by the aesthetic potentials for sensory perception. Derrida's concept of the *supplement dangereux* is a related reminder of the instability of a hermeneutic pattern that assigns meaning to the manifest: the supplementary meaning that simultaneously adds an extra layer and reveals a missing element undermines the mimetic project of interpretation. For Derrida, the implications of an inherent supplement are relevant to his deconstruction both of writing and of metaphysics as a whole: for writing "is dangerous from the moment that representation there claims to be presence and the sign off the thing itself...the substitute make[s] one forget the vicariousness of its own function and make[s] itself pass for the plenitude of a speech whose deficiency and infirmity it nevertheless only *supplements*."⁹⁰ The placement of writing as both an *addition* to and representation of the language function of speech reveals the insufficiencies of speech as a sign system that is always incomplete in its project, mediating thought and presence. The sense of being, likewise, is reconsidered as a *supplement* to presence, the already-present-potential-for-being, and the supplement itself both adds to presence and reveals its not-present nature: "metaphysics consists of excluding non-presence by determining the supplement as *simple exteriority*, pure

⁸⁹ Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 4.

⁹⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 144.

addition or pure absence...*What is added is nothing because it is added to a full presence to which it is exterior.*"⁹¹ That is to say, the "addition," the extra supplementary nature of the supplement, is not adding anything truly extra because it is a supplement to an already complete metaphysical presence. Thus the logic of the supplement, like the logic of a mimetic theory of interpretation (that is, a seeking-out of the already/always present *meaning* of the work), is working within a restricted economy of what is and is not available.⁹² Derrida indicates in his letter to Sontag that he was at that time re-reading Rousseau, working on his critique of the supplement that became the second part of the book *Of Grammatology*, and that he would send her the already-published articles from *Critique* that were to become the first part of the book. Against interpretation, against mimesis, against valuation: both critics at this moment are calling for a critique of structure that does not reduce elements to comparison. In Sontag's art-focused essays, the challenge to valuation rejects the need to justify art by discerning an immanent meaning. While Derrida's intellectual endeavors were focused upon his deconstruction of writing and the mimetic tendencies of Western metaphysics, I believe it is intriguing to note the self-identified affiliation between Derrida's philosophical interventions and Sontag's project for a contingent, sensibility-based approach to aesthetic analysis.

A reappraisal of the social/material aspects of Derrida's deconstructive project also reveals a manifestation of experiential relativity that was historically concurrent with the dissolution of the avant-garde's potential in the bourgeois public sphere. Language (both spoken and written, down to the individual letter) as well as a

⁹¹ Ibid., 167.

⁹² The essay "From Restricted to General Economy: a Hegelianism Without Reserve," included in *Writing and Difference*, was in fact published after the essays that comprise *Of Grammatology* and after his Feb. 1966 letter to Sontag. I purposely use his terminology from this subsequent essay as it reveals the connection between his affinity for Sontag's anti-mimetic critiques and the further development of a Nietzschean argument for a critical faculty based upon play, chance, and comedy.

constructed subjectivity—the creation of the double—create the framework for any “working-through” of sensuous-material experience; indeed, the letter can be seen as the basis for the creation of a human being, who perceives his/her individual life and subsequently desires a meaningful one. A juxtaposition of the work of Jacques Derrida with that of Marshall McLuhan yields a fruitful—if idiosyncratic—illustration of this revision of critical hermeneutics that was part of the emerging postmodern sensibility. Their respective endeavors in philosophy and anthropology/media studies also intersect with performance theory in interesting ways.

Derrida begins his theorization of an ephemeral *différance* with the concrete letter. The phonetic alphabet begins a dialectic: the cohesion of a self and its double; the possibility of Being and presence; and the ineffable, shifting signs and signifiers of language. Derrida turned to Antonin Artaud’s aesthetic manifestos as a theoretical model for the concrete yet ineffable materiality of the body and of sound, a corporeality that destroys any claim to the productiveness that is predicated by difference. “Although the rigorous system of this emancipation is found only in *The Theater and Its Double*, protest against the letter had always been Artaud’s primary concern. Protest against the dead letter which absents itself far from breath [*souffle*] and flesh.”⁹³ Derrida recognizes Artaud as a prophet (of the historical avant-garde) who railed against a constraining dialectic, a dialectic which “is the economy of repetition. The economy of truth. Repetition *summarizes* negativity, gathers and maintains the past present as truth, as ideality. The truth is always that which can be repeated.”⁹⁴ The schism which erupts with the creation of a repeatable (or comparable) truth (the prime example being Man made in the image of God) is what

⁹³ Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” in *Writing and Difference*, 187. The essay was originally published in *Tel Quel* (no. 20, winter 1965).

⁹⁴ Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*, 246. The essay was originally presented in *Critique* (no. 230, July 1966).

leads Derrida to criticize history, the subject, and philosophy as contingent, non-essential possibilities.⁹⁵ The process of enveloping negativity into the ideal, which is then represented in a repetition, is the foundation of writing, of language, and of the subject's body that "has thus always been stolen" from the self. Paraphrasing Artaud, Derrida writes, "who could the thief be if not the great invisible Other, the furtive persecutor who *doubles* me everywhere, that is, redoubles and surpasses me[...]—who could he be if not God?"⁹⁶ The live body itself can reclaim its whole *embodiedness* and smash its ideal repetition in Artaud's project for a Theatre of Cruelty. The separation of the body from its liveness, of the letter from its sound, and of the word from its meaning is a chain of separation that entails a closure. This pattern of closed circuits, of cycling repetitions, is the pattern of modern social and experiential organization.

Derrida's complex critique of structuralism (and, perversely, all criticism is structural, as Derrida admits⁹⁷) has a close counterpoint in McLuhan's contemporaneous complex critique of technological media. Derrida's argument against a closed metaphysical dialectic ("the thought of the thing as *what it is* has already been confused with the experience of pure speech; and this experience has been confused with experience *itself*"⁹⁸) is also a critique of empirical faith in sensory perception. This radical re-thinking complements Marshall McLuhan's deconstruction of human communication: "'Rational,' of course, has for the West long meant 'uniform and continuous and sequential.' In other words, we have confused reason

⁹⁵ The unnecessary structures of difference are argued against beginning in 1959, with the essay "'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology"; "Force and Signification" in 1963; "Violence and Metaphysics" in 1964; and "La parole soufflée" in 1965; and "Structure, Sign and Play" in 1966. Although *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena* were all published in 1967, Derrida's deconstruction of an essential nature rationality was concurrent with Marshall McLuhan's work.

⁹⁶ Derrida, "La parole soufflée," 180-181. Derrida also includes Artaud's wonderful shriek at the superceding Almighty: "AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY BODY, GOD?"

⁹⁷ Derrida, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, 5.

⁹⁸ Derrida, "Force and Signification," 9.

with literacy, and rationalism with a single technology. Thus in the electric age man seems to the conventional West to become irrational,”⁹⁹ McLuhan writes in his immensely influential 1964 work *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*. This dismantlement of structures of rationality is an alternative methodology that explains how social praxis itself creates the facility for sense ratios, by concentrating on the media of modern culture.

McLuhan reveals a skepticism towards uniform cognitive structures, down to the very letter. Post-Enlightenment theorists such as Jürgen Habermas have identified the concept of private ownership as a predicate for the (Western) public sphere; dissecting these structures even further, McLuhan posits that individual subjectivity is predicated by the alphabet:

It can be argued, then, that the phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has been the means of creating ‘civilized men’—the separate individuals equal before a code of law. Separateness of the individual, continuity of space and of time, and uniformity of codes are the prime marks of literate and civilized societies...It is in its power to extend patterns of visual uniformity and continuity that the ‘message’ of the alphabet is felt by cultures.¹⁰⁰

This is the manner in which the medium is the message, in its most basic form.

McLuhan’s analysis of the medium of the letter is comparable to Derrida’s theory of *différance*. McLuhan lays out the elements that lead to the processing of life praxis, which in turn can potentially create the perception of self and subjectivity, which have ultimately resulted in the interpretive methodologies of modern Western life. “The effects of technology [including the phonetic alphabet] do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance” (18). The detachment of experience from the immediate body to the mediated written word or physical object creates a system wherein

⁹⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 15. Originally published by McGraw-Hill in 1964 and then distributed later that year in paperback by Signet.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 84. Citations from McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* shall be henceforth cited in-text.

“information” can be detached from human life itself as “extensions of man,” and experience is not predicated on embodiment.

One of the unifying rubrics McLuhan uses in his analysis of “the extensions of man” is that of Hot and Cold technologies. These designations qualify the level of human energy put into conceptualizing the message of the technological medium, hence McLuhan’s interest in the letter: “Perhaps the most significant of the gifts of typography to man is that of detachment and noninvolvement—the power to act without reacting” (173). The dynamic of engagement is related to the perception of exchange: for instance, whether the human receiver’s relationship to the medium is a “direct” or “alternating” current, to use a metaphor (which is itself a construct of movement). “The word ‘metaphor’ is from the Greek *meta* plus *pherein*, to carry across or transport. In this book we are concerned with all forms of transport of goods and information, both as metaphor and exchange. Each form of transport not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver, and the message” (89-90). The sense of transport is also inherent in Derrida’s neologism “*différance*,” which plays with the different and the deferred—the “carried away.” McLuhan analyzes print and electric media, as well as other conditioning technologies (numbers; clothing; the wheel; roads) as systems of transport that condition human perception. The prescriptive degree of these frames determines them as hot or cold: “A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in ‘high definition.’ High definition is the state of being well filled with data...a cool medium [is] one of low definition...hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience” (22-23). In his wide-ranging analysis, McLuhan uses these paradigms of {hot/high definition/low participation} and {cool/low definition/high participation} to dissect the way that mankind extends itself in space and

perceives time. Derrida argues that the Being of the letter entails an assumption of delineated Presences; similarly, McLuhan argues that the phonetic alphabet sets up a structure that encourages an assumption of sequences in rationality, and a closed system of metaphors (the restricted economy). “Consciousness is regarded as the mark of a rational being, yet there is nothing lineal or sequential about the total field of awareness that exists in any moment of consciousness... Yet during all our centuries of phonetic literacy we have favored the chain of inference as the mark of logic and reason” (85). Where deconstruction attacks the logic of grammatology, the McLuhanesque critique of “hot” media subverts the assumptions of “rational” thought.

In many ways, McLuhan’s analysis of the extensions of man in the electrically-connected world of visual and verbal communication is also a postmodern continuation of the analysis of modern man’s sense ratios put forward by Georg Simmel at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, McLuhan likewise includes “Money,” “Clocks,” and “Numbers” as examples of media that construct experience; although he never references Simmel in text or bibliography, the correspondence of McLuhan’s analysis to the hypotheses offered in *The Philosophy of Money* is striking.¹⁰¹ McLuhan was continuing this study by pointing out how preponderance of electric media manipulates the sense of hearing and sight by adjusting the modes of absorption and physical exchange (for example: hearing a human voice without a body necessarily present; seeing other human beings in “real time” without their physical presence in space; offering a non-natural source of light). The message of the new

¹⁰¹In his 1907 work *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel argues that money and time are the key systems of valuation in modern mental life, writing that “Valuation as a real psychological occurrence is part of the natural world; but what we mean by valuation, its conceptual meaning, is something independent of this world; it is not part of it, but is rather the whole world viewed from a particular vantage point” (60). This, of course, is an expansion of Marx’s theory of the relative form of value and fetishization in *Capital*: “It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility” (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 321).

media is inextricably linked to social and political spheres. “Our electric extensions of ourselves simply by-pass space and time, and create problems of human involvement and organization for which there is no precedent” (105). The case studies in *Understanding Media* include not only records, movies, radio, and television, but weapons and automation (or “cybernation,” which McLuhan offers as a synonym; he is describing the concept of electrical information systems rather than purely mechanical automation).

A postmodern critique can contain a very real political applicability, through its attack on modern perceptual assumptions, the habits of thought.¹⁰² Michael Ryan, for instance, has pointed out that the “deconstruction of metaphysics can be integrated with the [Marxist] critique of ideology because metaphysics is the infrastructure of ideology, and until that infrastructure is deracinated, ideology will reappear against the best intentions of revolutionary activists, with the regularity of weeds to a garden.”¹⁰³ The quantifying tendencies of modern Western media are a larger framework for the homogenizing forces of the culture industry, just as the immanent repetition of *différance* in language is also a homogenizing force. “The open society is open by virtue of a uniform typographic educational processing that permits indefinite expansion of any group by additive means...The psychic and social consequences of print included an extension of its fissile and uniform character to the gradual homogenization of diverse regions with the resulting amplification of power, energy, and aggression that we associate with new nationalisms,” writes McLuhan (174). What seems to be a leap from a medium’s repeatability to nationalistic ideologies is in fact a variation of the dialectical process, which similarly “permits indefinite

¹⁰² Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of art and politics as functions of the human “habitus” is an important expansion of this theorization of the sub-ideological patterns of thought and their relationship to cultural reception. See fn3.

¹⁰³ Ryan, *Marxism & Deconstruction*, 117.

expansion” through sublation. The postmodern investment in de-centering, or at least mitigating, the sources of homogenization and *différance* is a search for ruptures in political and artistic conformity.

Artaud serves as a link between Derrida’s attack on phenomenological metaphysics and Sontag’s critical interventions in the social media of performance and literature. And Marshall McLuhan’s analysis, like that of Sontag, approaches the shifting nature of artistic production through its relation to shifting historical consciousness. A close study of these related early postmodern theories of sensory perception and deconstructions of rational subjectivity points towards a unifying thematic thread: the differing, but powerful dynamics of comedy.

The Avant-Garde, Postmodernism, Politics, and Comedy

Matei Calinescu makes an important point about the pervasiveness of play and parody in his analysis of the postmodern characteristics of the neo-avant-garde sensibility. In his summary of the 1960’s neo-avant-garde products as ironical, self-conscious, and “joyfully self-destructive,” Calinescu emphasizes the humor of the avant-garde’s death throes. “This aesthetic thanatophilia does not contradict other features usually associated with the spirit of the avant-garde: intellectual playfulness, iconoclasm, a cult of unseriousness, mystification, disgraceful practical jokes, deliberately stupid humor,” he writes in his conclusion of the “Crisis of the Avant-Garde in the 1960’s.”¹⁰⁴ This avant-garde spirit of play is the root of its popularization and appropriation, a process that makes comedy a key element in the interrelationship between the recuperation of avant-garde aesthetics and the culture industry in the developing postmodern approach to ideology critique. Comedy here emerges in the critical theory and analysis of this time in different manifestations: sensibilities of humor; play; camp; “failed seriousness”; and tragicomedy.

¹⁰⁴ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 125.

The sublation of avant-garde into popular culture was perceived early on by Susan Sontag, who herself serves as a metonym for the popular repackaging of a rebellious sensibility. Her resistance to popular absorption, facilitated by the self-consciousness of a “hot” culture, is at times frustrating in a meta-ironic fashion. In an early interview after the publication and popular success of *Against Interpretation* in 1966, Sontag explains that the celebrated essay on the “Camp” sensibility was originally intended to explore a sensibility of morbidity. ““Then I thought about it,” she said,

‘and I decided to use Camp as a better example of a sensibility. I had discovered Camp eight years ago, when I was living in Paris. It opened something up for me. Essentially, it was the discovery of irony. I had been terrifically solemn, scholarly. Camp meant something to me and added something to me. I wanted to share it.’”¹⁰⁵

Despite her original intention to “share” her discovery of irony, the rapaciousness of a culture that relishes “failed seriousness” seems to have escaped the critic; in the introduction to the collected essays, it is noted with a dismal tone that “I didn’t know—I had yet to learn, painfully—the speed at which a bulky essay in *Partisan Review* becomes a hot tip in *Time*.”¹⁰⁶ The appeal of a “cool,” detached, playful sensibility in an over-stimulated “hot” culture also applied to the public intellectual, an interesting example of the media industry appropriating intellectual critique, a phenomenon that was repeated by Marshall McLuhan’s frequent appearances on television.

Sontag’s openness to the playfulness of pop sensibility—which she analyzes with the same careful introspection as the “serious” experimentations of European writers and filmmakers such as Sartre, Camus, Resnais, and Godard—was part of her

¹⁰⁵ Dick Schaap, “Similes & Metaphors,” an interview with Sontag, *Book Week*, March 13, 1966 (Susan Sontag Papers).

¹⁰⁶ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, x.

critical resistance to content-driven interpretation. Throughout the collection, and culminating in “One Culture and the New Sensibility,”¹⁰⁷ Sontag makes the argument for a critical practice which “is more open to the pleasures of ‘form’ and style, [and which] is also less snobbish, less moralistic”; a pluralistic approach to the arts is one that considers all sensory explorations without condescension or valuation, and although there may be “excruciating seriousness,” there is also a voracious enthusiasm for “a new, more open way of looking at the world.”¹⁰⁸ A predominant attitude, as she notes at the end of the “New Sensibility,” is one of “fun and wit and nostalgia. It is also extremely history-conscious; and the voracity of its enthusiasms (and of the supercession of these enthusiasms) is very high-speed and hectic.”¹⁰⁹ Interestingly, the essay first appeared in a shorter form in the mass-market magazine *Mademoiselle*, which suggests that the media industry was keen on assimilating the intellectual developments as exemplified by Sontag’s critical aesthetics. The earlier essays “Notes on Camp” (1964) and “Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition” (1962) illustrate a similarly critical approach to this contemporaneous attitude.

In these essays, Sontag’s analytic eye is keenly attuned to the modes of performance in contemporary (urban) American life, in a pluralistic manner that would today fall under the rubric of performance studies.¹¹⁰ An embrace of theatricality—in the broadest sense, connoting the spectacular and the “played”—is at the heart of the most famous of the essays in the collection. In “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag sketches the dynamics of what she perceives as a contemporaneous style of judgment, one which is both a “way of looking at things” and a “quality discoverable.”

¹⁰⁷ Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” 293-304.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹¹⁰ The field of performance studies was also in its nascent stage at this point, with the flourishing of non-theatrical performance events based on ritual and the plastic arts. Richard Schechner, newly appointed editor of the *Tulane Drama Review*, would define the field in the next decade in his work with anthropologist Victor Turner.

A key element of the Camp sensibility “is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of the things-being-what-they-are-not”: to “perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.”¹¹¹ There is a centrality of performance to the camp sensibility, although her descriptions of campy items and methods include plenty of visual examples as well. The unifying approach to the sensibility is one of superficiality: that is to say, appreciation for the surface qualities of actions and appearances. The quality of role-playing is the underlying unifier of artifice. There is a double-edge at work here: the camp sensibility, per Sontag, is based upon a “love for human nature” and a sentimental appreciation for the human effort in the artistic expression. Nevertheless, these efforts are appreciated on a superficial basis, for the surface qualities that reveal their failed attempt at seriousness. The camp aficionado enjoys the theatre, artwork, film, story, etc., when she can “become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt.”¹¹² The camp state of mind, as perceived by Sontag, is an appreciation of the spectacle of artifice, an estranged theatricality that is nevertheless deeply engaged with its own superficiality. The camp aesthetic is complemented by a more ambiguous aesthetic of spectacle which Sontag ascertained in her analysis of Happenings.

While the “Notes on ‘Camp’” are very much a treatment of performance in popular culture, Sontag turns to experimental, neo-avant-garde performance with an analysis of Happenings as a modern Surrealist aesthetic phenomenon. “Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition” (originally written in 1962 for the magazine *The Second Coming*) is an attempt to critique what was emerging as a new “genre of spectacle,” performance events that were latently avant-garde in their pursuance of an

¹¹¹ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation*. 277-280.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 285.

interdisciplinary experimentation. This experimentation was evident via the formal construction of the performance events as well as via the treatment of the audience.¹¹³

Happenings, in contrast to the bound conventionalities of scripted theatre, are described as “creating an asymmetrical network of surprises, without climax or consummation; this is the alogic of dreams rather than the logic of most art.”¹¹⁴ Not surprisingly then, Sontag turns to the historical avant-garde to assess the aesthetics of the Happenings, tracing the legacy of Surrealism. This comparative analysis defines Surrealism as a 20th-century aesthetic sensibility above and beyond the pre-WWII artists unified by the Breton manifesto. Surrealism is a sensibility that “aims to shock, through its techniques of radical juxtaposition.”¹¹⁵ In tandem with Sontag’s campaign against categorizing hermeneutics, the immediate advantage to Surreal aesthetics lies in their appeal to the human sensorium.

Sontag’s analysis of Surrealism points out the aesthetic use-value of radical juxtaposition, in that it jars the (historically contingent) aesthetic system of valuation that determines all judgment. The Surrealist sensibility can be used “for the purpose of reeducating the senses (in art) or the character (in psychoanalysis).”¹¹⁶ Sontag turns to the spectacular visions of Artaud to express the terrible potential of the Surrealist sensibility, an “art form which is designed to stir the modern audience from its cozy emotional anesthesia” via the mechanics of terror. “Artaud shows the connection between three typical features of the Happening: first, its supra-personal or impersonal

¹¹³ The untraditional, abusive treatment of the audience was not a new experimentation on the part of the creators of Happenings, either. As Laurence Senelick has pointed out in his article “Text and Violence”: “In avant-garde performance the danger is transferred to the audience, which finds itself in an anomalous situation, incapable of taking anything for granted, and often under attack” (in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde*, 25-26). Senelick is writing about the inter-war Continental historical avant-garde performances by the Dadaists, Futurists, Expressionists, etc. Sontag’s 1962 observations on Happenings provides a stepping stone in the trajectory of audience abuse: in 1966 the practice would become canonized with Peter Handke’s (scripted) play *Offending the Audience*, a great example of Fiedler’s aphorism that “truly experimental art aims at *insult*.”

¹¹⁴ Sontag, “Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition,” in *Against Interpretation*, 266.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

treatment of the persons; second, its emphasis on spectacle and sound, and disregard for the word; and third, its professed aim to assault the audience.” While this jarring assault on aesthetic valuation may be conducted via terror, in her conclusion Sontag notes the interconnectedness of terror and comedy:

The Surrealist arts of terror link up with the deepest meaning of comedy: the assertion of invulnerability...Surrealism is perhaps the farthest extension of the idea of comedy, running the full range from wit to terror. In the heart of comedy, there is emotional anesthesia...[It] stresses the extremes of disrelation—which is preeminently the subject of comedy, as ‘relatedness’ is the subject of tragedy.¹¹⁷

This concept of “disrelation” connects to play, comedy, and humor along various levels. At a basic level, comedy is a prime modality of ambiguity, as it operates through mechanisms of surprise and recognition, of transgression and popularity, of pleasure and discomfort. The analysis of comedy at the end of the essay on *Happenings* is closely modeled upon Henri Bergson’s structural argument of laughter’s social and psychological functions, wherein comedy is based upon the mechanization of human expectations. Humor is a technique for overemphasizing social structures in order to release the elements of human nature that strive against the norm.¹¹⁸ Laughter is thus both a corrective and a primal/mental process that works in a similar manner to the Freudian dream-work, and Sontag also connects the dream-work elements of the Surrealist project to its characteristics of terror and comedy. Her critique also recalls the formal criticism of Northrop Frye in its summation of comedy as a form of social normativity, one which requires “a scapegoat, someone who will be punished and expelled from the social order...In the *Happening* this scapegoat is the audience.”¹¹⁹ It is complemented, however, with an appreciation for the more nihilistic approach of Artaud’s sensory decadence, which celebrates the “allogic of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 273-274.

¹¹⁸ Bergson, “Laughter,” in *Comedy*.

¹¹⁹ Sontag, “*Happenings*,” 274.

dreams...Only in our dreams do we nightly strike below the shallow level of what Artaud calls, contemptuously, 'psychological and social man.'"¹²⁰ The nihilistic tendencies of comedy are here linked to those of de-anesthetizing shock, the purview of the avant-garde.

This comedy is distinguished by the disrelation of sensation: that is, an inappropriate reaction (which includes an inappropriate lack of reaction), or the inexplicable phenomenon of violence, which is rendered into "absurdity." It is the excess of sensation which is nevertheless devoid of meaning—that is to say, it is denied a reception of dignity. The growing popularity of the "Theatre of the Absurd" at this time (discussed further in chapter 3) is related to the eager reception of an analysis of Camp. In fact, Sontag declares Jean Genet's ideas as Camp, even if his works do not achieve true Camp style. For the taste for "camp" likewise functions on a mechanics of disrelation, a victory of irony over tragedy, as the "Notes" indicate. "There is seriousness in Camp...and, often, pathos. The excruciating is also one of the tonalities of Camp"; nevertheless, "Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'...Camp proposes a comic vision of the world...an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment." Surrealism weds terror to comedy through the disrelation of experience from meaning; in the same dynamic, the Camp sensibility of detachment appreciates purposeless pathos and playfully disintegrates seriousness. The detached theatricality of the Camp aesthetic is closely related in this analysis to the discombobulated spectacle of the avant-garde. Moreover, the cultural saturation with the avant-garde is linked to the emergence of camp. Sontag asserts near the end of her theses that "Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence."¹²¹

¹²⁰ Ibid., 270-272.

¹²¹ Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 277-279.

Sontag points towards the link between the culture industry, surrealism, and the primacy of comedy in the burgeoning postmodern sensibility—what Fredric Jameson would later thematize as the age of late-capitalism.

Derrida's philosophical interventions also suggest a playful attitude towards rational thought, stressing the irreducible nature of laughter. We might connect his "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (a lecture originally given in October 1966 at the Johns Hopkins University) to McLuhan's theories. In Derrida's explanation of the rupture that marks the stepping outside (or inside, rather: he uses the viscosity of the circle to clarify the open presence that is indicated by the absence of a cohesive totality) the structure of structure, he relates to McLuhan's reconsideration of the un-"Present" extensions of man that create the structures of sensory perception.¹²² In critiquing the potential for play within structures (using the structuralist social analysis of Lévi-Strauss for example), Derrida notes that play can be seen as entering the impossible center of the structure, the presence of its nontotalization: "this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because [of] the sign which replaces the center."¹²³ Perceived thus, play is a cause for tension in critiques based upon workable structures, for play is a "disruption of presence," and "if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence." Thus, like Sontag, Derrida argues for an interpretation of interpretation as a setting aside of structures and a critical approach "which is no longer turned the origin, [and] affirms play...[This is] the second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche pointed the way."¹²⁴ And indeed, Derrida compliments Sontag, writing that he "loved

¹²² Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," in *Writing and Difference*, 278-293.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 292.

the authentically Nietzschean vein through [her] whole book.”¹²⁵ Part of the critique of “structures” as such is a critique of the “centered structures” such as the Hegelian dialectic, which is “the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude.”¹²⁶ Opposing this immobility is the potential for infinite play based upon no grounded elements other than its own potential, the Nietzschean plurality.¹²⁷ Derrida, in his subsequent essay “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” (originally published in May 1967) refers to this grounding of play as a byproduct of a “restricted” economy. It is in this consideration, that of the potential for a general economy of unrestricted play, that the importance of the anomalous nature of laughter is considered.

“Laughter, which constitutes sovereignty in its relation to death, is not a negativity, as has been said...To be indifferent to the comedy of the *Aufhebung*, as was Hegel, is to blind oneself to the experience of the sacred, to the heedless sacrifice of presence and meaning.”¹²⁸ Through forcing logical continuity, the Hegelian metaphysic has created a blind spot to the excesses of negativity by trying to ground and balance negativity, Derrida argues: “Hegel has bet against play, against chance.”¹²⁹ The sublation of the negative, described here as a form of lordship, is confronted with the unfettered sovereignty of Georges Bataille, a sensibility which refuses to be reduced to meaning or to a comparative valuation of power. The “sovereign” response is to laugh. The “heedless sacrifice of presence and meaning,”

¹²⁵ Derrida, Hand-written letter to Sontag, Feb. 12, 1966 (Susan Sontag Papers). “*J’ai aimé la veine authentiquement nietzschéan de tout votre livre.*”

¹²⁶ Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” 292.

¹²⁷ An analysis of this essential facet of Nietzsche’s (anti-)metaphysics was concurrently being developed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose *Nietzsche on Philosophy* first appeared in 1962. In his 1971 essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Michel Foucault turned to Nietzsche’s ironic treatment of the concept of *Ursprung* (origin) to support his deconstruction of historiography.

¹²⁸ Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy,” 257.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 260.

described in Nietzschean fashion as an “experience of the sacred,” is the infinite potential within play that inspires laughter, a refusal to be reduced to a fixed meaning. “Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity” Derrida writes; “play includes the work of meaning or the meaning of work, and includes them not in terms of knowledge, but in terms of inscription.”¹³⁰ The inscription of meaning is not reducible to an immanent knowledge but is rather a function of the play enabled by varying degrees of participation and perception, hot and cold. Like McLuhan’s hot and cold extensions, the social practicality of this argument for a metaphysics of Nietzschean laughter stems from its analysis of the historicity of perceptive structures. The potential for ruptures in rational subjectivity can be found in technological structures themselves: hence Derrida’s guerilla attacks against the binaries of Western metaphysics and McLuhan’s explanation of the electric light’s creation of virtual sensory perception. But is there a way to de-anesthetize via the “disrelations” of comedy? The (utopian) postmodern hope is that comedy functions within experiential structures while exhibiting rupturing force.

The comedy of disrelation is not only a humor arising from a structural abnormality of mechanistic inclinations; it is a celebration of the human potential for affect that is *beyond* meaning, the Nietzschean potential that Derrida likewise turned to. The comic vision of the world enabled by a Camp sensibility, a comic vision that is “an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment,” is put into motion by a “new, more complex relationship to ‘the serious’” via an appreciation of “artifice as an ideal, theatricality.”¹³¹ Likewise, the detachment with which one appreciates the terrible

¹³⁰Ibid., 256; also 260.

¹³¹ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 288.

“demonic” comedy of latter-day Surrealism is enabled by an Artaudian appreciation of sensory cruelty, one that disavows mimetic morality in favor of total immersive spectacle. Sontag connects the social need for an estranged aesthetic sensibility to the “psychopathology of affluence,” a psychopathology that erupted in the theatre with Peter Brook’s Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Marat/Sade*, for example, which I turn to in Chapter 5.

Indeed, the cultural relationship between America and Britain is also important to this phenomenon as it manifested in the popular theatre. Through the 1950s, dramatic innovators on the Continent, including Brecht, Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett (although Irish, writing in France), had circulated amongst a coterie of English-language theatre scholars, practitioners, and translators, who worked on both sides of the Atlantic, and these “European avant-garde” writers began to appear regularly on the English-language stage. As I shall demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, key figures in the English-language exchange route included Eric Bentley, Martin Esslin, John Willett, Kenneth Tynan, and Alan Schneider. Theatre historian Martin Priestman, charting the influx of Continental drama into Britain after World War II, points out that another influential element in the post-1956 British theatre boom was “the more diffuse and less pin-downable ‘Americanization’ of British culture.”¹³² In “Hegemony postponed: the unraveling of the culture of consensus in Britain in the 1960s,” historian John Seed describes how the Cold War military-political pact between Britain and the United States (a interdependent defense policy that is still a strong political force today) was cemented at this time. Moreover, the British encouragement of global capitalist industry through the 1950s had resulted, by the beginning of the new decade, in “[r]ising standards of living, an improved quality of life and a whole new culture of affluence [which] were dissolving old class identities.”

¹³² Priestman, “A critical stage,” in *Cultural Revolution?*, 129.

¹³³ While the huge difference in the importance of class can never be dismissed in any cross-Atlantic analysis, the global influence of English-language capitalism and global hegemony is an essential factor behind the political voices and artistic developments in production and reception in mainstream Anglo-American theatre and the perceived “Americanization” of British culture in general.

In Marshall McLuhan’s terminology, the industrialized nations of the Cold War era were oversaturated with extensions “hot” with high definition, which result in a Newtonian reaction of detachment (low participation). “The effect of hot media treatment cannot include much empathy or participation at any time,” writes McLuhan, explaining the sensible consequences that stem from the amplified structures of human communication. Sontag also suggests that “cool” art is the complex solution to the “culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled.”¹³⁴ Like Sontag, McLuhan argues in favor of comedy as the subsequent dominant sensibility in the oversaturated field. Considering the modern sensibility, cultivated in the context of increasing extensions of man and political-economic pressures, McLuhan speculates that “as for the cool war and the hot bomb scare, the cultural strategy that is desperately needed is humor and play. It is play that cools off the hot situations of actual life by miming them...And what we consider entertainment or fun in our [hot] media inevitably appears as violent political agitation to a cool culture.”¹³⁵ Although McLuhan’s terminology alludes to mimesis, the underlying strategy may be seen as similar to Sontag’s argument for an affective *disrelation*. The humorous “miming” of hot situations via *play* is a complication of the seemly-immanent serious: it confuses the sensible expectations of fear, pride, and sadness by provoking the aesthetic anomaly of laughter. The strategy of laughter as an

¹³³ Seed, “Hegemony postponed,” in *Cultural Revolution?*, 22.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 31.

estranging reaction is of course key to the Brechtian political theatre. As the following chapters demonstrate, Brecht's theory of comedy as a political tool in the theatre, as well as Artaud's vision of sensory shock, were taken up by theatre practitioners with varying degrees of success.

Conclusion

One of the main strengths of the culture industry however is its voracious assimilation of the aesthetic shock-value of the avant-garde itself. This destructive proliferation of possibilities was not lost on Peter Bürger, who, in his conclusion to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, looks forward to the new critical project that awaits the cultural theorist in the wake of the historical avant-garde: "The total availability of material and forms characteristic of the post avant-gardiste art of bourgeois society will have to be investigated both for its inherent possibilities and the difficulties it creates."¹³⁶ The "hidden dialectic" (as Huyssen puts it) of avant-garde and industrial culture was an important dimension of the shift in critical theory from the structures of modernity to the postmodern revisions at this historical moment. As Jameson's work on periodizing the 60s points out, we must consider the historicity of these intellectual contexts as part of a greater Western cultural environment of affluence. The following chapters explore the Anglo-American theatre of this time for evidence of this hidden dialectic, demonstrating that the few moments of subversive politics in early 1960s Anglo-American commercial theatre were predicted by the developing postmodern theory of the time, and were informed by different—though connected—sensibilities of the historical avant-garde: the Brechtian comic dialectic of history and an absurd, comic reinvention of Artaudian cruelty.

¹³⁶ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 94.

CHAPTER 2

BRECHT AND THE POSTMODERN AVANT-GARDE: POLITICS, HISTORY, AND THE DIALECTICS OF COMEDY

Introduction

“The hope for intelligence in the theater is not through conventional ‘seriousness,’” Susan Sontag speculated in one of her 1964 essays for *Partisan Review* on “Going to the Theater.” “It is rather, I think, through comedy. The figure in the modern theater who best understood this was Brecht.”¹³⁷ The critical investment in comedy and humor opens up a new perspective on the Brechtian legacy of experimental performance as an essential facet of the recuperation of the historical avant-garde project in this moment of early postmodernism. This chapter thus addresses the following questions: What is Brecht’s relationship to the avant-garde? How does comedy and play function in Brecht’s work? And what are Brecht’s postmodern qualities? I am here expanding upon Baz Kershaw’s contention that Brechtian theatre theory is central to the postmodern radical theatre.¹³⁸ Brecht’s critical project expanded the productive potential in the mainstream Anglo-American theatre for both political consciousness and comedy at this particular historical moment.

Roland Barthes, who championed Brecht in France, argues in his 1975 essay “Brecht and Discourse” that Brecht’s theatre theory created a new discursivity of performance, one that played with its very nature as a function of discourse,

as if it were natural to take pleasure in the truth, as if one had the simple right, the immoral right to submit the bourgeois text to a critique itself formed by the reading techniques of a certain bourgeois past; and indeed where would the critique of bourgeois discourse come from if not from that discourse itself?¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Sontag, “Going to the Theater,” in *Against Interpretation*, 147.

¹³⁸ Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*.

¹³⁹ Barthes, “Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity,” in *The Rustle of Language*, 216.

The popular theatre of the United States and Britain—namely, the New York and London theatres—began to incorporate the Brechtian schema of playful critique within its own bourgeois discursive sphere at this moment of the early 1960s. Cultural critics who noted audiences’ increasing acceptance of “avant-gardist” shock-tactics, such as Susan Sontag with her analysis of the “Happenings” of 1962, exposed another development of Brecht’s early observation that “Society absorbs via the apparatus whatever it needs in order to reproduce itself.”¹⁴⁰ Brecht’s aphorism is a keen observation of the perpetual absorption that enables Western culture to adapt to new innovations and use them to perpetuate itself: its “industrial” nature, as Adorno and Horkheimer metaphorically described it. Ironically, Brecht’s work itself is part of this larger process of “culture industry appropriation.” Janelle Reinelt has argued that “Brecht’s plays and much of his theoretical writings require capitalist conditions of production and social organization in order to do their work of unmasking ideology.”¹⁴¹ By closely examining the Brechtian dialectical theatre and its relation both to the historical avant-garde and to a postmodern critique of culture, this chapter demonstrates why Brecht’s theories were (and still are) key in achieving a popular critical discourse in the theatre.

The relationship between history and social consciousness plays out in a comic dialectic in Brechtian theory, and the importance of enjoyment in performance and critique is never far from the Brechtian schema. On account of his detailed analyses of Western theatrical institutions and of the social function of the audience’s perception, Brecht is “central in two ways: he has shown that the media institutions are always contingent, and has foregrounded the audience as already-always interpellated by ideology,” as Susan Bennett summarizes in her influential study on theatre

¹⁴⁰ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 34.

¹⁴¹ Reinelt, *After Brecht*, 5.

audience reception.¹⁴² At the same time, Brecht's transformation of the established institution of the Western theatre puts him in a unique relationship with the historical avant-garde. Brecht's transition from an alignment with the Weimar-era ethos of *Neue Sachlichkeit* to the Marxist-informed epic theatre also requires an appraisal of the complex balance between modernist and postmodern tendencies through his changing creative and theoretical project. Finally, a case study of the first New York success of a Brecht work—the long-running off-Broadway production of Brecht and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*—opens up the historical context for the subsequent reception and interpretation of popular Brechtian satire by mainstream audiences.

The Sausage-Factory: Brecht, the avant-garde, and the theatre apparatus

To understand the dynamics of Brecht's works within the Cold War capitalist cultures' recuperation of the avant-garde, we must first consider the particularities of Brecht's relationships with the historical avant-garde. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger recuses himself from an analysis of Brecht's work as dramatic theory and instead addresses the question of how Brecht's project, as a relationship between artistic and political institutions, relates to the historical avant-garde movements.¹⁴³ He notes the similarities between Brecht and the historical avant-garde movements, namely in their creation of “non-organic” works of art, wherein the individual elements operate with their own levels of meaning. The non-organic nature of an historical avant-garde artwork can be found in its use of textual and visual fragments (such as the technique of montage), and in its play of meanings via quotation, which Bürger analyzes using Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory.

¹⁴² Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 35. W.B. Worthen makes a similar argument in his *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theatre*, writing “Brecht calls for the theater to dramatize its own rhetoricity as a social practice, to show how staging theatrical experience *for* the spectator necessitates the staging *of* a spectator or spectators, the reproduction of material individuals as an interpreting, interpretable, ideologically packed ‘audience’” (148).

¹⁴³ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 88.

Bürger suggests that rather than interpreting “the avant-gardist structural principle of the nonorganic itself to be a political statement, it should be remembered that it enables political and nonpolitical motifs to exist side by side in a single work.”¹⁴⁴

Bürger’s examples include the French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp and his Ready-Mades, André Breton’s Surrealist poetry, and the collages of the German artist and designer John Heartfield. Other key artists of the historical avant-garde include the expressionist painter and political cartoonist George Grosz; the Futurist poet Filippo Marinetti; and expressionist playwright Ernst Toller.

Brecht’s first plays, *Baal* (1918), *Drums in the Night* (1922), and *In the Jungle* (1923) are in some respects reflective of what Bürger calls the “non-organic.” The term “non-organic” is analogous to the mechanical, in direct opposition to the organic, auratic artwork in an autonomous sphere, a “category of bourgeois society,” as Bürger points out.¹⁴⁵ The raw material of language and character in the early plays such as *Baal* and *Drums in the Night* achieves an aesthetic whole via the function of its internal randomness. This approach to human behavior mandates the portrayal of action without necessarily a theorized motivation. This is made explicit in the oft-quoted introduction to *In the Jungle of Cities*: “In observing this battle, do not rack your brains for motives.”¹⁴⁶ The dramaturgy recalls Bürger’s description of the aesthetics of “chance” and “montage” in the avant-garde, such as with the Surrealists: “meaning is contained in the chance constellations of objects and events that they take note of as ‘objective chance.’ That such meaning cannot be specified does not change the Surrealists’ expectation that it might be encountered in the real world.”¹⁴⁷ The

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁴⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 46. I use the term “auratic” as a reference to Walter Benjamin’s theorization of the change in artistic production and reception in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility.”

¹⁴⁶ Brecht, *Jungle of Cities*, 12.

¹⁴⁷ Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 66.

non-organic work suggests cogent meaning in chance as a process. Likewise, the dramaturgical structure of Brecht's early "raw material" is characterized by a bricolage of action and language. While these two plays (often called expressionist) are non-organic in some formal dimensions—the non-naturalism of place and time, randomly motivated action—they are each nevertheless still unified by an overarching narrative thread. Another key difference between Brecht's plays and the works of the Expressionists and Surrealists is that the dramas reflect Brecht's innate skepticism of individual psychology and the psychoanalytic roots of trauma as a worthwhile dramaturgical conflict. *Baal* and *In the Jungle*, in particular, while sharing some formal characteristics with their expressionist predecessors, explore the dynamics of cruelty and violence that human beings are capable of and how this shapes the world. Critic and cultural historian John Willett has pointed out that the "sobering-up" of Expressionist artists was impelled by the movement's failures, "with its lofty fraternal sentiments, to cope at all realistically with the mad cruelties of the German Right."¹⁴⁸ This critical objectivity was the focus of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, "new objectivity" or "new matter-of-factness."

As John Willett describes in his *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period*, the influence of utilitarian Constructivism from Russia; the declining attraction of Expressionism and Surrealism (especially in the visual arts); and reconstructed and relatively stabilized German government and economy by 1924 all instigated a growing impetus of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in German architecture, visual art, theatrical production, and writing. The movement was anchored by an ironic combination of influences: Russian utilitarianism and, more and more, *Amerikanismus*. "Precision, efficiency, the no-nonsense approach: these were the American qualities,"¹⁴⁹ and a

¹⁴⁸ Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period*, 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

fascination with American cities and technological development emerged in German architecture, montage, and drama, especially with Brecht's plays. Willett summarizes the movement in contrast to the earlier Expressionist tendencies of German art: "objectivity in place of the previous intense subjectivity, self-discipline in lieu of passion, scepticism and dry humour instead of solemnity and faith."¹⁵⁰ Brecht himself wrote about this new artistic approach in a 1926 essay, "Neue Sachlichkeit," in which he expresses a generational antagonism towards a bourgeois audience of "poker-faced men," characterized by an "astonishing impenetrability."¹⁵¹ Brecht's tone is both cheeky and confrontational, criticizing an audience that is incapable of passionate reactions and passively consumes the false, banal nonsense played out on-stage. Brecht declares the Neue Sachlichkeit to be "reactionary," and he offers two analogies for the development of a critically objective theatre-culture: the pure, confrontational opposition of boxing, and the radical, disinterested, clinical work of the operating table. Brecht's own expression of Neue Sachlichkeit is characterized by a provocative, hyper-macho stance, a typical example of a "crushing brutality, with its weakest-goes-to-the-wall ethos," channeled through a fascination with sport in general, and boxing in particular.¹⁵²

Brecht referenced sport as a new model for reception and production on several occasions as he called for the end of stiff, stale theatrical productions in his mid-1920s essays for German periodicals and intellectual journals. Brecht's theoretical writings, most importantly, explain how he attempted to work within the social institution of the theatre rather than to dismantle it entirely: it is a particular sort

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 110.

¹⁵¹ Brecht, "Neue Sachlichkeit," in *Schriften zum Theater I*, 157. The section on „Der pokerfaced man“ describes the „verblüffende Undurchdringlichkeit des Publikumsgesichts.“

¹⁵² Willett, *Art and Politics*, 102. David Bathrick in "Max Schmeling on the Canvas") explains the significance of boxing for Weimar-era artists as an expression of nationalist, masculine, and anti-Romantic ethos.

of manifesto—the manifesto being, as Martin Puchner has pointed out, the shared poetics of political and artistic (avant-garde) revolutionaries.¹⁵³ There emerges a sense of the theatre as a life force, a forum for social and psychological activity at once sensual and intellectual, a physical space that, indeed, imbricates art and life praxis. The practical, objective immediacy of boxing arena is again referenced in a 1926 essay for a Berlin newspaper: “The demoralization of our theatre audiences springs from the fact that neither the theatre nor the audience has any idea what is supposed to go on there. When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place,”¹⁵⁴ he points out. The article continues as a polemic upon the actual structure and management of the German theatre business, which allows no room for “fun” or “sport.” His counterargument to those who blame the creative writers is that a “play is simply unrecognizable once it has passed through this sausage-machine [*Fleischmühle*].”¹⁵⁵ The following year, another essay published in the same periodical continued the argument, calling for a sociological approach to the theatrical apparatus rather than a stagnant aesthetic. The language of “Shouldn’t We Abolish Aesthetics?” (1927) is pertinent to Bürger’s summation of the avant-garde’s project. “This generation doesn’t want to capture the theatre, audience and all, and perform good or merely contemporary plays in the same theatre and to the same audience...it has a duty and a chance to capture the theatre for a different audience,” Brecht writes.¹⁵⁶ The plea here, in this letter to an “anonymous” sociologist,¹⁵⁷ is noteworthy for its active language, echoing the oft-noted military connotations of the avant-garde as a concept and as an aesthetic category. Brecht’s

¹⁵³ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*.

¹⁵⁴ Brecht, “Emphasis on Sport,” in *Brecht on Theatre*.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 8.

¹⁵⁶ Brecht, “Shouldn’t We Abolish Aesthetics?” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 21.

¹⁵⁷ The “Herr X” to whom the letter-as-essay is addressed was Prof. Fritz Sternberg (Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 22).

command to “capture,” or, alternatively, to conquer [eroben¹⁵⁸] the institution of the theatre is a functional strategy that aligns him with the aggressive stance of the historical avant-garde.

“Thoughts on the Difficulties of the Epic Theatre,” published in the literary section of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1927, provides another good example of his combative attitude towards the entrenched assumptions within the theatre apparatus. “What the audience sees in fact is a battle between theatre and play [drama: *Stück*], an almost academic operation where, in so far as it takes any interest in the process of renovating the theatre, all it has to do is observe whether the theatre emerges as victor or vanquished from this murderous clash.”¹⁵⁹ Brecht’s plan for a contemporary renovation does not necessarily abandon the classical and extant theatrical repertoire, however. Brecht’s argument is for a “*radical transformation of the theatre*” that “has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time.” The new mentality calls for a critical theatre, the *epic theatre*, which at this point was still “to be worked out in detail.” The nascent concept of the epic theatre is already calling for a radical break, a rupture between traditional expectation and immediate practical function: “Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things.”¹⁶⁰ However, as Bürger points out, whereas “the avant-gardeists believe they can directly attack and destroy that institution [of bourgeois art], Brecht develops a concept that entails a change of function and sticks to what is concretely available.”¹⁶¹ An emphasis on reception and the role of the audience is an important aspect of his concrete agenda. A fragment from the mid-20’s, “Regarding our

¹⁵⁸ Brecht, “Sollten wir nicht die Ästhetik liquidieren?,” *Schriften zum Theater I*, 129.

¹⁵⁹ Brecht, “The Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 22-23. Also: “Betrachtung über die Schwierigkeiten des epischen Theaters,” *Schriften zum Theater I*, 131.

¹⁶⁰ Brecht, “The Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties,” 23. [“*Nicht miterleben soll der Zuschauer, sondern sich auseinandersetzen*”: “Betrachtung” 132.] This “coming to grips with things” is a philosophical hallmark of the Neue Sachlichkeit.

¹⁶¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 89.

intended theatre: Our audience,” offers an insight into Brecht’s perspective on the new expectations of the audience in the Weimar-era theatre world. “Young people don’t not go to the theatre because they don’t have money. It’s not that there is any reason for them not to go to the theatre, but rather that there has been no reason for them to go to the theatre” [emphasis added].¹⁶²

A concrete agenda for operational and functional change is the key point of contention between Brecht and his historical avant-garde peers, especially the Dadaists and Surrealists, of whom he was highly critical. In “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” he overtly critiqued the avant-garde endeavor to escape the conditions of Western bourgeois ideology completely: the “*avant-garde* don’t think of changing the apparatus, because they fancy that they have at their disposal an apparatus which will serve up whatever they freely invent, transforming itself spontaneously to match their ideas,” he wrote in 1930. “But they are not in fact free inventors; the apparatus goes on fulfilling its function with or without them; the theatres play every night; the papers come out so many times a day; and they absorb what they need; and all they need is a given amount of stuff.”¹⁶³ In addition to the model provided by sport, the use of technology (particularly film) was another one of Brecht’s strategies for changing the operation and thus function of the modern theatre.¹⁶⁴ This Neue Sachlichkeit stance towards mass culture and film was especially evident in the revolutionary theatre work of Erwin Piscator, who directed at the Berlin Volksbühne from 1924 through 1927,

¹⁶² Brecht, “Über das Theater, das wir meinen,” *Schriften zum Theater I*, 80. („*Aber die jungen Leute gehen nicht deshalb nicht in die Theater, weil sie kein Geld haben. Es gibt keinen Grund für sie, nicht hineinzugehen, sondern es gibt eher keinen, hineinzugehen.*“).

¹⁶³ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” 34-35.

¹⁶⁴ The central importance of technology in general and film in particular in cultural production remained a key issue for cultural theorists: as Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” essay analyzed a decade later in 1936, the camera has the potential both to present human experience in a de-familiarizing way and to serve as a politically manipulative eye.

and whose innovations in production and direction directly influenced Brecht's development as a theatre theorist and dramatist.

In the first years of the 1920s, Piscator (a member of the German Communist Party) was the artistic director for Berlin's proletarian theatre, and then at the Volksbühne he began the use of projected film footage, still photography, and watercolors and cartoons (usually by Grosz) behind the actors on-stage, providing a visual setting and commentary on the live action. He subsequently developed a program for what he dubbed "documentary theatre," in which the dramaturgy itself was pulled from "a montage of authentic speeches, essays, newspaper cuttings, appeals, pamphlets, photographs, and film of the [First World] War and the [Russian] Revolution, of historical persons and scenes."¹⁶⁵ The visual revolution of the Piscator stage was another manifestation of *Neue Sachlichkeit*: the contrast of written and spoken language; the visual dialogue between film—photographic image—stage picture; and the phenomenological dialectic between the live and the technological time-space continuums. In a complimentary essay in 1926 on "The Piscator Experiment," Brecht lauded the use of technology to portray an objective perspective of the characters and their words, approving of the flat surface of the image and the cold reality of film as a document, as opposed to the "emotional and at the same time ambiguous word."¹⁶⁶ Piscator's use of film was a key inspiration for Brecht as they conjointly developed the concept of an "epic theatre." "The epic theatre must continue to experiment with the utilization of film as a pure document of photographed reality, of certainty," Brecht wrote in conclusion.¹⁶⁷ Piscator's own conception of the "epic theatre" is a variation of the avant-garde assault on segregated

¹⁶⁵ Piscator, "The Documentary Play," in *The Political Theatre*, 94. Piscator originally published this collection of essays in 1929; a revised edition was published in Germany in 1963.

¹⁶⁶ Brecht, "Der Piscator Versuch," *Schriften zum Theater I*, 134.

¹⁶⁷ Brecht, "Piscator Versuch," 135. („Die Verwendung des Filmes als reines Dokument der fotografierten Wirklichkeit, als Gewissen, hat das epische Theater noch zu erproben.“)

art- and life-praxis: “it was about the extension of the action and the clarification of the background to the action, that is to say it involved a continuation of the play beyond the dramatic framework.”¹⁶⁸ In the visual/technological arena of the Piscator theatre, the epic theatre could highlight the contradictions of sensory inclinations, and the audience, as historical materialists, could contemplate the experiences represented in the drama.

*The Messingkauf Dialogues*¹⁶⁹ is an unfinished project that Brecht worked on mostly between 1937 and 1940 to chart out his theory of the theatre in a didactic manner, using a dramatic dialogue among a Philosopher, an Actor, an Actress, a Dramaturg, and an Electrician over the course of four nights. The dialogues cover a large scope, including dramatic genre, social import, the definition of art, and the realities of producing theatre. On the first night, the Philosopher provides an explanation of Marx, and his critical analysis of politics and ideology is applied to the use of historical dramas in the theatre. He emphasizes the concrete needs and historical context of the living theatrical audience and argues that social judgment outweighs aesthetic judgment; or rather, aesthetic judgment is determined by social conditions. The characters discuss the *Verfremdungseffekt*, which Brecht had begun to formulate around 1936 in his essay “On Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” and which he continued to explicate in essays.¹⁷⁰ In the Dialogues, the Philosopher explains, if “empathy makes something ordinary of a special event, alienation makes something special of an ordinary one...The audience is no longer taking refuge from the present day in history; the present day becomes history” (76). Brecht intended that estranging performances would draw awareness to historical conditions and to the way that material conditions effect human actions, through a combination of intellectual

¹⁶⁸Piscator, “Flags,” *The Political Theatre*, 75.

¹⁶⁹Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. In the following paragraph, citations are indicated in-text.

¹⁷⁰John Willett, editorial note on “Alienation Effects,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 99.

engagement and detachment of empathy. This moment in the *Messingkauf Dialogues* also provides a comparison of the historical avant-garde with Brecht's aesthetics of estrangement.¹⁷¹ The Philosopher, answering a question from the Dramaturg, agrees that alienation is also a form that appears in the Surrealists' paintings. Surrealism, though, is merely a "primitive application of the alienation effect," he says; "such art's function is likewise socially hamstrung, so that art simply stops functioning too. So far as results are concerned it finishes up as shock for entertainment's sake" (78). The concept of shock is related to the entertainment value of art, a dynamic that Brecht wrestled with in his own theories of a socio-political *productive* theatrical art.

Peter Bürger, in his history-theory, outlines the avant-garde principle of provocation, observing that shock "is aimed for as a stimulus to change one's conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis."¹⁷² The dangers of shock as a solely sensory effect include its non-specificity and its short half-life. In his analysis of the avant-garde's use of shock tactics, Bürger points out that shocking-ness "does not insure that the recipient's change of behavior is given a particular direction," and that "[n]othing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock; by its very nature, it is a unique experience."¹⁷³ The hypothetical reaction of the epic theatre spectator is a clinical study of the relationship between (avant-garde) shock and (dialectic) critical thought: "That's great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh," wrote Brecht in the mid-1930's, in a then-unpublished essay entitled "Theatre

¹⁷¹ "Verfremdung" has been translated as "alienation," "distanciation," and as "estrangement." I agree with Brecht scholar Loren Kruger, who argues that "Brecht explicitly defines Verfremdung as an estrangement from and thus critique of alienation. Willett's familiar translation 'alienation' thus not only undoes Brecht's critique of alienation but also loses the precise train of thought and practice that connects Verfremdung not only to Marx and Hegel but also to related concepts" ("Keywords and Contexts: Translating Theatre Theory," 357). Thus I use the term estrangement, unless directly referencing a citation that uses the term "alienation."

¹⁷² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80. Susan Sontag's analysis of shock as an artistic device is considered in Chapter 1.

¹⁷³ Bürger, 80-81.

for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?”¹⁷⁴ Brecht’s theory of epic theatre makes use of “shock” as a distancing effect, as part of the foregrounding of sensory reaction, but this visceral experience is always connected to critical reflection, even if (or perhaps especially when) feeling and opinion are contradictory. The art of provocation is only part of the method of capturing and changing an artistic institution; the work must then also inspire a subsequent critical stance of the material conditions behind the action of the play, a Marxist philosophical practice that all spectators are potentially capable of, in the reception-theory of the epic theatre.

It was in 1926, at 28 years old, that Brecht began to read Marx, and as he observed later in life, “[w]hen I read Marx’s *Capital* I understood my plays...It wasn’t of course that I found I had unconsciously written a whole pile of Marxist plays; but this man Marx was the only spectator for my plays I’d ever come across.”¹⁷⁵ The inherent Marxism of Brecht’s work, even before he was consciously using Marxist materialism as a method of socio-political critique, lies in the use of estranging performance to illustrate the dialectic of false consciousness. This is what Marx, explaining his impetus and methodology, famously called “turning Hegel on his head (or rather, putting him back on his feet)”: the Marxist writer endeavors to reveal man’s alienation from his own labor and thus from the material conditions behind his/her political, economic, and social status. Roland Barthes recognized this in Brecht’s work and argued, in the periodical *Théâtre populaire* as well as in critical journals from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, that Brecht’s influence was essential to the contemporary political theatre. In a 1956 essay in *Arguments*, “The Tasks of

¹⁷⁴ Brecht. “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?” In *Brecht on Theatre*. 71. This is also detailed in the oft-cited Brecht essay on the “Street Scene,” in which Brecht uses the example of a witness’s detached re-enactment of an accident seen on the street to describe the epic performance.

¹⁷⁵ Brecht’s note to the Suhrkamp Verlag collection *Schriften zum Theater I*. Quoted in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 23-24.

Brechtian Criticism,” Barthes observes the centrality of a Marxist critique of ideology in the Brechtian theatre:

Brecht’s greatness, and his solitude, is that he keeps inventing Marxism. The ideological theme, in Brecht, could be precisely defined as a dynamic of events which combines observations and explanation, ethics and politics: according to the profoundest Marxist teaching, each theme is at once the expression of what men want to be and of what things are, at once a protest, (because it unmask) and a reconciliation (because it explains).¹⁷⁶

This hypothesis of a perpetually-invented Marxism suggests a process of improvisation, a play of history and humanity that is re-drawn with each production. We might compare this flexibility to Louis Althusser’s concurrent re-considerations of Marxism and humanism. The paradox of a Marxist humanism, Althusser argued, it that it is based on a very anti-humanism: that is, it unmask the socially-constructed nature of any “humanist” ideology.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, faith in such a humanism is necessary in order to improve the historical conditions of humanity: this is the reconciliation that Barthes perceives in the “didactic” nature of Brecht’s work.

Brecht began to explain the dynamic between pleasure and the Marxist goal of ideology critique in the 1936 essay “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction.” The relationship between the two is clear-cut: the act of learning itself provides pleasure: “[i]f there were not such amusement to be had from learning, the theatre’s whole structure would make it unfit it for teaching. Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse.”¹⁷⁸ The fourth night of the “Messingkauf Dialogues” includes a conversation on “Cheerful Criticism,” in which the actor asks the Philosopher and the Dramaturg to explain how people are supposed to take pleasure in criticizing the characters and stories they see

¹⁷⁶ Barthes, “The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism,” in *Critical Essays*, 74.

¹⁷⁷ Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*. Althusser’s specific argument regarding the Marxist false consciousness and a Brechtian critical reception will be considered later in this chapter.

¹⁷⁸ Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” *Brecht on Theatre*. 73.

before them. The Philosopher describes the process of critique-through-spectatorship as being like a game: “I like playing around with your heroes,” he tells the actor; “that’s to say, it entertains me to imagine different ways of behaving and compare their actions with others than are equally possible.”¹⁷⁹ The Dramaturg chimes in as well, averring that “this cooking things up for the audience, [it] can only be conducted in a cheerful, good-tempered mood, a mood where one’s disposed for fun.”¹⁸⁰ The importance of fun in this radical new institution warrants careful consideration, for the relationship between play, humor, Marxism, and avant-garde aggression is key to the Brechtian theatre.

Brecht: Producing Fun

One of the difficulties in utilizing Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde to contextualize Brecht’s aesthetic theory is Bürger’s omission of performance. In a recent analysis of the avant-garde sensibility and its effect upon performance practices, Laurence Senelick notes the trope of ambiguity in the performances of the historical avant-garde (that is, the pre-World War II experimental Continental performers). Analyzing the cabaret performances of the Hydropathes in Paris and Frank Wedekind’s *Elf Scharfrichter* [Eleven Executioners] in Munich, Senelick reveals that “the point was that it was impossible, in this unnudging performance, to determine whether to laugh or feel sad at each stanza...the [audience] was put on its mettle to figure out what attitude to take to the performance. For the first time in the Western Theater, irony becomes a major component of the performer’s art, rather than the dramatist’s.”¹⁸¹ In this type of performance, the audience is put off-guard by trying to determine the attitude of the performer; moreover, the venue and the attitude of the spectator towards the event will also influence the level of irony that the

¹⁷⁹ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, 88.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸¹ Senelick, “Text and Violence.”

performance conjures up. The use of ironic performance dynamics in order to elicit critical thinking becomes an especially interesting problem when assimilating “avant-garde” techniques into popular performance. Senelick provides a pre-war example of a “popular” adoption of “the avant-garde apotheosis of the machine”¹⁸² in the figure of Karl Valentin. Valentin, a clown/actor/playwright, used quotidian objects and everyday bourgeois occupations as fodder for his comic-nonsense destruction machine, creating a “theatre of estrangement, a void in which persons and objects are alike reduced to signs.”¹⁸³ It is not a coincidence that Senelick uses the particular term “estrangement,” for Valentin’s comedy cabaret—playing in Munich beer-halls, most certainly not an avant-garde performance—was a huge influence upon Brecht, by his own admission.

In the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, the Dramaturg notes the important inspiration and guidance provided to “the Augsburger” (Brecht himself) by Piscator, Büchner, and Wedekind. “But the man he learnt most from,” the Dramaturg concludes, “was the clown *Valentin*, who performed in a beer-hall.”¹⁸⁴ A short essay included in a special-Brecht-edition of the October 1922 Munich Kammerspiele program pamphlet reveals Brecht’s deeply thought-out respect for Valentin’s clownish performances. “He is informed by an utterly dry, internal sense of the comic, at which people can smoke and drink and be ceaselessly shaken with internal laughter—laughter that is not particularly good-natured.”¹⁸⁵ The absurdity of Valentin’s shtick resonated with Brecht’s deep respect for the *trompe l’oeil* of the ridiculous. At this early (i.e. pre-Marxist) stage, Brecht’s criticism already reveals a keen appreciation for the

¹⁸² Ibid., 32.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸⁴ Brecht. *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. 69.

¹⁸⁵ Brecht, “Karl Valentin,” in *Schriften zum Theater I*, 39. (“*Er ist von einer ganz trockenen, innerlichen Komik, bei der man rauchen und trinken kann und unaufhörlich von einem innerlichen Gelächter geschüttelt wird, das nichts besonders Gutartiges hat.*”)

dialectical relationship between play and the critical faculties. “And then here we are shown the *inadequacy of all things*, including us ourselves. When this man, one of the most powerful intellectual figures of our time, wields before our eyes *naïveté in the flesh* out of the connections between composure, stupidity, and *joie de vivre*, the herd laughs and takes it all in.”¹⁸⁶ Whether or not the laughing masses registered the existential critique that Brecht perceived, the pleasure of this sharp comedy was deeply rooted in social discontent. The beer-hall comedian emptied out and played with a sense of inadequacy in life-praxis.

The connection between the estrangement of the avant-garde’s ironic performance practices and the surreal clowning around of the comedy headliner seems to be in the humor they both employ in order to underscore the ridiculousness of the everyday: singing a song, telling a story, reenacting a typical middle-class occupation. This humor is a predominant sensibility for both those with political pretensions and those without. With regard to Valentin’s particular comic performances, Senelick argues that “for all the surrealism of his visions, however, Valentin remained a popular entertainer, and, although a comic genius, cannot be enrolled among the programmatic avant-garde, because his artful nonsense made no pretence of intellectual defiance or solemn provocation and aggression.”¹⁸⁷ The key word that differentiates Valentin from the avant-garde in the above argument is neither “defiance” nor “provocation,” though: for making people laugh at decapitations, as Valentin could do, can easily be seen as a provocative, defiant agenda (as Senelick himself argues with regard to Père Ubu’s violence). Rather, the key factor in Valentin’s ineligibility to the avant-garde is his lack of pretense to be anything other than a “popular entertainer.” Brecht, as both

¹⁸⁶ Brecht, *Ibid.* (“*Hier wird gezeigt die Unzulänglichkeit aller Dinge, einschließlich uns selber. Wenn dieser Mensch, eine der eindringlichsten geistigen Figuren der Zeit, den Einfältigen die Zusammenhänge zwischen Gelassenheit, Dummheit und Lebensgenuß leibhaftig vor Augen führt, lachen die Gäule und merken es tief innen.*”)

¹⁸⁷ Senelick, 33.

playwright and theorist, appreciated the power of popularity and Valentin's cunning ambiguity. He learned the strategy of popular provocation from the clown. Without doubt, the sensory experience of the smoking herds, laughing at the aggressive satire of bourgeois banality, inspired Brecht's "avant-garde" suggestion for cigar-smoking spectators in the stalls, making it "quite impossible for the actor to put on unnatural, convulsive, and outmoded theatre."¹⁸⁸ Brecht never denied the power of the popular, arguing in a 1938 then-unpublished essay that " 'Popular' means intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them / adopting and consolidating their standpoint / representing the most progressive section of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership: thus intelligible to other sections too."¹⁸⁹ Popular appeal was never antithetical to political agenda, and in fact, as Brecht developed his Marxist critique he envisioned his political, "avant-garde" aesthetic as a "popular" coup. Brecht's and Piscator's shared interest in mass culture, including film and sport, informed their theatre work.

In his theoretical essays, Brecht argued that the pleasure taken in overt entertainment is analogous to the pleasure taken in the estranging practices of the epic theatre, a practice that eschews illusory hypnosis in antiquated theatre boxes. The alienation of the senses precludes the uncritical affect of empathy, but Brecht the playwright never supposed that emotions can be suppressed all together. The hypothetical epic spectator is meant rather to appreciate the dialectic between the emotive response and the opinions that triggered such a feeling: there's "nothing obvious in it," as Brecht wrote in "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?"

¹⁸⁸ Brecht, "Über das Theater der großen Städte," *Schriften zum Theater I*, 77. Unpublished fragment, written in the mid-1920's. („Es ist dem Schauspieler...gänzlich unmöglich,...ein unnatürliches, krampfhaftes und veraltetes Theater vorzumachen.“) Also referenced in Willett, "Editorial Notes," *Brecht on Theatre*. 9.

¹⁸⁹ Brecht, "On the Popular and the Realistic," in *Brecht on Theatre*, 108. Written in 1938 for *Das Wort* but not published in Brecht's lifetime (Willett, "Note," 114).

The equivocation on the matter of “feelings” must be viewed in light of Brecht’s wariness of Aristotelian precepts in general. Aristotle’s *Poetics* connects empathy with mimesis as building blocks of the drama, and these twin phenomena produce the intended results of instruction and entertainment: mankind “learns first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation.”¹⁹⁰ But the pleasure taken in the imitation of life, in the process of identification, is a false enjoyment of illusion in the scientific age, and Brecht rejects the primacy of feelings that have been elicited by so-called realistic theatre—so-called “realistic” because it is merely the continuation of the assumed truths of bourgeois history.¹⁹¹

The Philosopher of the *Messingkauf Dialogues* clarifies why “reality” cannot be imitated as such, and why any empathetic response to the realistic is a misguided hypnosis: “One has to be able to see through it too...to see the laws that decide how the processes of life develop...they [cannot] be spotted if the audience only borrows its heart from one of the characters involved.”¹⁹² Curtailing identification encourages a multiplicity of viewpoints. This strategy replaces a naturalistic reality—a holistic, essential truth about human action and response—with a relativistic reality, in which human actions are displayed, not without compassion, but nevertheless with objectivity (distance). The emotions elicited in lieu of empathy ought to be both enjoyable and recognizable *as* emotions. For example, the agony of Mother Courage’s losses is sharpened by our anger at her blind pig-headedness; our pity for Shen-Te’s loneliness is countered by amusement at her hypocrisy; the horror of Arturo Ui’s violence is compared with his absurd clownishness. And at all times, we are to

¹⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, , lines 1448b.4-9.

¹⁹¹ Brecht also rejected the rigid artistic structures of Soviet realism. See “Cultural Policy and the Academy of Arts” (*Brecht on Theatre*, 266-270) for a diplomatic critique of communist realism in the arts.

¹⁹² Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, 27.

remember that we are not in reality: we are in the theatre, the social laboratory for the scientific age.

In the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, the dynamics of estrangement are directly connected to the comic tradition, for the *Verfremdungseffekt* “is an ancient artistic technique; it is known from classical comedy, certain branches of popular art and the practices of the Asiatic theatre.”¹⁹³ The reference to classical comedy might recall the works of Aristophanes, for example, of whom the nineteenth-century German critic August Schlegel wrote, “he does not even spare the patron of his own art [Dionysus], in whose honor this very play [*The Frogs*] was exhibited. It was thought that the gods understood a joke as well, if not better, than men.”¹⁹⁴ After all, the gods were still gods—their sense of humor was proof of their power. If the gods can appreciate a joke, then mankind ought be able to laugh at itself as well—while maintaining respect for humanity as a whole. Brecht used comedy as a tool both to estrange the audience from empathetic pathos and to make enjoyable the critique of Western historical injustices. A prime example of the theatre as a comic laboratory experiment is Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann* (alternately translated into English as “A Man’s a Man”; “Man is Man”; and “Man Equals Man”). In this play, a human’s putative subjectivity is subject to a practical joke of epic proportions.

Despite his end-of-life criticism of his first works,¹⁹⁵ Brecht nevertheless continued to return to *Mann ist Mann*, tweaking it up until the end of his life, and re-editing the previous versions for a new 1954 publication. The play was produced in

¹⁹³ Ibid., 102. Brecht was greatly influenced by the performances of Mei Lanfang’s company, which he saw in Moscow in 1935. This was a key inspiration for his formulation of “Verfremdung,” first articulated in an essay “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting.” Brecht shares his inspiration by (and reduction of) “Orientalist” aesthetics with Antonin Artaud, whose aesthetic theory is largely driven by his continual enthusiastic references to the Balinese theatre.

¹⁹⁴ Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 165.

¹⁹⁵ Brecht, “Bei Durchsicht meiner Ersten Stücke,” *Schriften zum Theater III*. The complications of comparing early Brecht with the epic theatre are examined in the following section.

five different forms over its first twelve years: in theatres in Darmstadt and Düsseldorf in 1926; published in 1926; revised for radio production in 1927; revised and produced again at the Berlin Volksbühne in 1928; revised for a Berlin Staatstheater production in 1931, directed by Carl Koch and Brecht; and in a second published form in 1938; ultimately, the final published version was compiled Brecht in 1954.¹⁹⁶ It is a sign of the critical value of the structured conceit of the play that it is so malleable in language and form, and Brecht's constant tinkering with the play illustrates his developing approach towards economic, political, and artistic developments over twenty-five years. As the English-version editors John Willett and Ralph Manheim point out, "of the completed plays only *Galileo* and *The Good Person of Szechuan* preoccupied him to anything like the same extent as this quite early piece."¹⁹⁷

Mann ist Mann is the story of the transformation of the clueless Irish porter Galy Gay into a member of the Queen's army in British India. A group of three British soldiers (Jesse, Polly, and Uriah), who have lost their fourth squadron member, transform the susceptible, naïve Gay—who was out one day buying a cucumber for dinner—into their fourth company member, Jeraiah Jip. They are aided in this endeavor by the Widow Begbick, the operator of the army canteen, a woman who has her own intrigue going on: the seduction of Sergeant Fairchild, known as "Bloody Five." The dismantling of the absurd clown Galy Gay, as well as the cruel and crass bumbblings of the Army representatives, has deep comic roots despite the imperialist menace and the military brainwashing that drives the plot. Again, as the editors point out, "there is no getting over the underlying element of farce in this work."¹⁹⁸

The usefulness of *Mann ist Mann* as a socio-political critique lies in the absence of any resolution to the systems of exploitation and suffering that play out

¹⁹⁶ Willett and Manheim, eds., "Introduction," in *Man Equals Man*, x-xiv.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., vii.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., xvi.

through the piece, including the inability to decide upon any “collective subject.” It is possible to assign a range of allegorical definitions to Galy Gay, the three soldiers, the Widow Begbick, Jeraiah Jip, or Bloody Five. Uriah, Polly, and Jesse, the three soldiers who commandeer Gay’s identity in order to complete their machine gun squad, are successful in their identification of Gay as a susceptible target, in their brainwashing of Gay, and in their survival as a unit. Their wiliness and powers of manipulation, not to mention their lack of scruples at raiding everything from foreign temples to men’s psyches, point to a collective imperialist mentality (made overt by their function in the play as British soldiers in India). Brecht would later suggest their plausibility as S.A. representatives.¹⁹⁹ However, with the inclusion of the final scenes 10 and 11, the status of the machine gun unit as the collective military and social power is superceded by the metastasized power of the transformed Galy Gay. These final two scenes, after the successful brainwashing of Galy Gay, were among the scenes cut from the middle versions (1928-1938) of the play. Upon revising the play for publication in 1954, Brecht re-inserted these scenes, along with scenes 5 & 7 (inside the Pagoda). In “Looking Back through my First Plays,” Brecht commented on his revision, saying that originally he had “been unable to see any way of giving a negative character to the hero’s growth within the collectivity”; he realized though, at this later point, that “this growth into crime can certainly be shown, if only the performance is sufficiently alienating.”²⁰⁰ It is particularly intriguing that Brecht realized the negative aspects of the final collective in his last version. As Galy Gay transforms, his naiveté and exploitation must be set in quotes, through a *gestus*, in order for his unpleasant development to be clearly understood as a process.

¹⁹⁹ Brecht, “Notes to the 1937 Edition,” in Willett and Manheim, eds., *Man Equals Man*, 107.

²⁰⁰ Brecht, excerpt from “On Looking Through My First Plays,” in Willett and Manheim, eds., *Man Equals Man*, 108. See also Brecht, “Bei Durchsicht meiner Ersten Stücke,” *Schriften zum Theater III*.

The soldiers complete Gay's transformation in scene 9, as the Army train is on the way to a battle in Tibet, and the subsequent scene in the train (scene 10) and the victory at the Fortress of El-Djowr (scene 11) conclude the tale with Gay's ascendance as the leader of the platoon, taking down the enemy fortress in five cannon shots and "*charging on irresistibly like a war elephant.*"²⁰¹ Gay's malleable desires are revealed as a font of violent potential—which, importantly, Gay hints at when first approached by the soldiers in scene 3: "I run like a freight train once I get started," he tells them. Once they have steered Gay's desires in a new direction, he is indeed as impossible to stop as a freight train: he cheerfully devours everyone's rice rations and pummels down the fortress, accepting his comrades' I.D.'s as their designated leader as they move on to the conquered territory. The vulnerable naïveté of Gay and his inability to say no is revealed as a dangerous potential for omnivorous assimilation, and while some interpreters have posited Galy Gay as the epitome of petty bourgeois values exploited by capitalism,²⁰² the key irony of this fable is that the exploitation functions in both directions. The Widow Begbick discerns Gay's potential to assimilate the machine itself, a process that will result in an unstoppable desire for rice and conquest once his desires have been re-directed: "That kind eats even when he's nobody," she warns the soldiers as Gay observes the funeral for his previous identity (scene 9; part v). Galy Gay, a combination of malleability and ravenousness, can likewise serve as allegory for the appropriating power of imperialist and capitalist structures, absorbing whatever new identities and mechanisms are necessary for survival and growth. The easy conversion of Gay's banality from innocence to violence is both amusing and disturbing. The clown who is told what to do by his wife follows the absurd logic that "I have bought a cucumber for dinner and therefore cannot do exactly as I would like"

²⁰¹ Brecht, *Man Equals Man*, 71.

²⁰² Willett and Manheim, "Introduction" *Man Equals Man*, xv.

(scene 4). The transformed Gay-Jip, who has been told what to do by those who gave him a uniform and dog-tag, now follows the “ancient urge to kill every family’s breadwinner to carry out the conqueror’s mission” (scene 11). Returning to the play in the 1950s, Brecht recognized the chilling lesson contained in Gay’s final persona up in the hills of Tibet: the cucumber-buying clown has all-too-easily been transformed into an unstoppable killing machine. All it takes is the right sort of collective persuasion.

Mann ist Mann is particularly important as evidence of Brecht’s theory of dramaturgy and reception because it is a transition play, begun when he was transitioning out of the artistic community of the Neue Sachlichkeit and assimilating Marx into a new critical and creative articulation: the epic theatre. The characters are vessels of shifting motivations and circumstances that lie outside of their own construction, a key example of Brecht’s scorn for the *Characterkopf*, the expressionistic, sentimental “personality.”²⁰³ *Mann ist Mann* demonstrates a connection between Brecht’s earlier, historical avant-garde forms and the later dynamics of the epic theatre that aspires to Marxist dialectics. Walter Benjamin, a friend and fan of Brecht, recognized in Brecht’s work a constant play of contradictions as human behavior adjusts to contingent circumstances, an alienating mechanism that encourages critical analysis but complicates any final judgment or obvious resolution. Benjamin returned several times to *Mann ist Mann* in his essays on the valuable Marxist critique of Brecht’s theatre, beginning with a 1930 radio essay on Brecht.²⁰⁴ After reading the long speech that explains the assembly of Gay, Benjamin recognized Brecht’s position towards his own artistic creation: “What he writes is not a ‘work’ but an apparatus, an instrument. The higher it stands, the more capable it is of reshaping, dismantling, and transforming...[T]he supreme claim which

²⁰³ Bathrick, “Max Schmeling,” 135.

²⁰⁴ Benjamin, “Bert Brecht,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 2*.

can be made of the written word is that of its quotability.”²⁰⁵ Benjamin suggests that the usefulness of the epic theatre lies not only in its mechanism of quoting an idea, that is, placing ideological structures themselves in quotes, but also in its very status as an instrument that can be constantly recalibrated and adjusted. In his last essay on Brecht’s work, “What is the Epic Theatre?” in 1939, Benjamin returned to Galy Gay as a quintessential epic figure, constructed through gestic moments, edited scenes and intervals (like film), and defamiliarizing interruptions. “Galy Gay,” he writes, “...is nothing but a bodying forth of the contradictions which make up a society.”²⁰⁶

This creative and productive strategy of quotability primes this project for a detached, presentational epic theatre for postmodern continuations. The discursive quality of the Brechtian theatre, and the high value it places on comedy, opens up its postmodern potential to puncture cultural homologues that mythologize aesthetic forms and ideological content. In this analysis I am adopting Andreas Huyssen’s and Fredric Jameson’s proposals of postmodernism as a historical condition rather than only as a style.²⁰⁷ Mapping the role of the avant-garde in “great divide” between the historical tectonics of “modernity” and “postmodernity,” Huyssen describes how in the early manifestations of the postmodern condition, in the wake of the “codified high modernism of the preceding decades, the postmodernism of the 1960s tried to revitalize the heritage of the European avantgarde.”²⁰⁸ And as he notes earlier regarding both Brecht and Antonin Artaud, “it was precisely the attempt to rewrite the parameters of avant-gardism which makes their work representative for an age which has since then come to be called postmodern.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Benjamin, 371.

²⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin, “What is the Epic Theatre?” in *Selected Writings* 4, 303.

²⁰⁷ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 182.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

Postmodern Perspectives on the Epic Theatre

Elizabeth Wright in *Postmodern Brecht*²¹⁰ suggests a relationship between Brecht's work and postmodern theory by emphasizing the disintegration of meaning in language in Brecht's early, more "expressionist" works.²¹¹ The spirit of ambiguity, instability, and play is, for Wright, most evident in Brecht's first works, and she differentiates between the postmodern "early de-centered Brecht of the *Fabel* of self-deconstruction" and the "modernist" Brecht, the "didactic Brecht of the *Fabel* of dialectical contradiction" (90). The two earliest works, *Baal* and *In the Jungle of Cities* (which Brecht rejected in his last years²¹²), operate as a theatricalization of experience, and "engage in a fictive experimenting with the interaction of language and experience, to explore the very ground of representation" (97). With regard to these "pre-Marxist" plays, Wright argues that the "politico-aesthetic function resides rather in the way Brecht manages to make the spasmodic, discontinuous perceptions of a reality-in-process into a theatrical object, thus challenging our automatic interpretations of the concrete and our assumptions that words are able to match that which we sensuously perceive" (98). In her analysis of Brecht's dramaturgy, the two early plays fulfill the postmodern potential for an uncentered subjectivity, for the experimentation "resides rather in probing the constitution of the subject at the intersection of social (historical) and psychological (transhistorical) forces" (97). The characters of these plays—Baal; Garga and Shlink—"are an attack on our assumptions of stable identity, our own and that of others, for in these plays no one has a fixed identity, least of all the 'hero,' who tries to wrest it from others in a ceaseless round of aggressiveness and exploitation" (98-99).

²¹⁰ Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*. In the following section, citations from Wright shall be indicated in-text.

²¹¹ In this association she suggests a comparative analysis that Richard Murphy argues persuasively in *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*.

²¹² Brecht, "Bei Durchsicht meiner ersten Stücke."

Beginning in the later 1920s, Brecht was working out his theoretical approaches to performance and the theatre as an institution by writing essays that developed what came to be called the epic theatre. He continued to work on his theoretical project until the end of his life, and in his last essays he was moving to a new articulation, that of “the dialectical theatre.” The “Short Organum for the Theatre,”²¹³ along with the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, is a key document of Brecht’s practical and theoretical schema. Written in 1948, after years of exile and intermittent production opportunities, the Organum is a culmination of Brecht’s theories on the purpose and the potential of an estranging theatrical practice. Brecht’s prose reflects the trope of disenchantment in modernity: “when we look about us for an entertainment whose impact is immediate, for a comprehensive and penetrating pleasure such as our theatre could give us by representations of men’s life together, we have to think of ourselves as children of a scientific age.”²¹⁴ We can see how the Neue Sachlichkeit stance of objectivity continued to inform Brecht’s perspective on aesthetics; his efforts to merge art- and life-praxis are centered around the critical faculty of modern *Mensch*. In this respect, Brecht’s methodology continued to be informed by Modernism, by its insistence on rational critique through experimentation. The desire for “penetrating” representations for the scientific age is indicative of what Rosalind Krauss, in a 1972 reflection on Modernist aesthetics, described as a critical “language that was open to some mode of testing.”²¹⁵ While in terms of construction, the earlier Weimar-era plays are more identifiable as postmodern literature, the Brechtian schema for a theatre that plays with the idea of critique, through a synthesis of humor and Marxist historical materialism, makes possible however the critical move from modernist rationality to a postmodern mode.

²¹³ Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 179-205.

²¹⁴ Brecht, “A Short Organum,” 183.

²¹⁵ Krauss, “A View of Modernism,” 978.

The human condition in the epic plays is made comic in such a way as to encourage the spectator “to view the contradictions as fruitful in their very absurdity.” *Postmodern Brecht* demonstrates how the comedy of the Brechtian theatre is inescapably linked to history, and moreover how comedy is used to underscore the necessary break with history. Comic situations and characterizations emphasize a break with the weight of historical conditions, and time becomes a field for improvisation. “For Brecht,” Wright argues, “comedy has the function of showing that the future depends on being able to finish with the past, on getting rid of its encrustations and fixities” (64). In *Mann ist Mann*, for example, the whole point is that we see how a completely banal creature can be efficiently and thoroughly transformed into an imperialist military hero—a story that is both historical (in colonial India) and still conceivable. His clown-like persona is key to both the comedy and the chilling finale. The clown, after all, cannot say no; in fact, one of the basic tenets of both clown-work and improvisation is the absence of “no” as a performable option. The clown’s unfettered performative realm of motivation and action is analogous to Derrida’s proposition of a metaphysics of infinite “play,” which “must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence.”²¹⁶ Negation is impossible, for it nullifies the open-play world of the clown and the improvisation. Likewise, the military representative of an all-powerful Empire cannot say no to the command to destroy. *Mann ist Mann*’s ultimate conclusion is terrifying in its analogous continuation of Galy Gay’s original quest for dinner. Gay, completely reassured by the regularity of his new life as Soldier Jeraiah Jip, confidently carries out his new assignment as part of the “hundred thousand” forces, for “one equals no one,” as the Widow Begbick has reminded him. He proves insatiable in his new identity, both literally and figuratively: Brecht’s canny use of stage action includes

²¹⁶ Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” in *Writing and Difference*, 292.

Gay appropriation of his peers' rice rations, one after the other, while he prepares the guns for the assault on the Tibetan fortress. "One more ration," Gay asks, and he is given yet one more; "I'm ravenous now we're going into battle, and I like this fortress better and better" (scene 11). The child-like interest in his dinner is paired with his enthusiasm for the battle. The characters of *Mann ist Mann* are fundamentally ahistorical personages whose choices and lack of self-control make them applicable models for a continual critique of man's susceptibility to hegemonic ideologies.

The strategy of juggling historical conditions and ahistorical, comic contradictions undergirds Brecht's theory through its development. A later addition to the "Short Organum," written circa 1954, explicitly connects the pleasurable aspects of the epic theatre to a dialectic of playfulness.

The theatre of the scientific age is in a position to make dialectics into a source of enjoyment. The unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of every circumstance, the joke of contradiction and so forth: all these are ways of enjoying the liveliness of men, things and processes, and they heighten both our capacity for life and our pleasure in it.²¹⁷

A 1955 note on "Dialectics in the Theatre" reiterates the pleasure mankind takes in change, stating that we "must be able to see and feel ourselves and society as changeable, and we must then get this through an art with enjoyable methods and adventurous laws, after which the changes take place."²¹⁸ These later writings on dialectics in the theatre broaden the epic approach to one of open-endedness, resisting totality within the theatre. This adventurous methodology has socio-political potential because of its very ability to change and develop within and against the theatre, as an apparatus of social expectations, the discursive quality recognized by Barthes. The

²¹⁷ Brecht, "Appendices to the Short Organum," in *Brecht on Theatre*. 277. Also in *Schriften zum Theater II*, 702.

²¹⁸ Brecht, "Notizen über Die Dialektik zum Theater," in *Schriften zum Theater II*, 921. ("So muß er sich und die Gesellschaft als veränderlich spüren und sehen können, und so muß er, in der Kunst auf vernünftliche Weise, die abenteuerlichen Gesetze, nach denen sich die Veränderungen vollziehen, intus bekommen.")

“instability of every circumstance” is evident in the absence of resolution in the later epic plays, especially *Mother Courage* and *The Good Person of Setzuan*. The audience leaves the theatre having enjoyed the jokes and contradictions, but the political work of resolution (and revolution) is left open for us to play with and try to resolve outside the theatre.

Wright’s separation of the “postmodern expressionist” Brecht from the “modernist epic” Brecht hinges upon what she dubs the “collective subject” predicated the epic philosophy. Granted, the spectator-as-subject is generally treated as a site of unified subjectivity in Brecht’s comprehensive *Theatertheorie*. However, the dialectical theatre also requires that we question the nature of subjectivity at the intersection of the historical concrete and the psychological. Certainly, contemporary theoreticians of spectatorship have offered various reconsiderations of the long-standing treatment of theatrical reception as a dynamic between a semiotically-informed performance/environment and a subject/spectator.²¹⁹ We must consider the multiple vantage points that hover above the collective body of the audience, as well as the unstable subjectivities of the individual audience member. The differences of gender, class, racial/ethnic/religious identification, sexuality, age, education, language, and previous experience of theatrical spectatorship are all factors that complicate a productive theory based upon a receptive *collective-subject*. Moreover, political consciousness itself is a non-presumptive variable that could be placed in opposition to a collective political subject for the theatre. Brecht himself realized this fairly early on in his theorization of his own project, and he expressed frustration at the limits of applying an “experimental” theatre intended to instruct and amuse to the society at hand. “Enjoyment of learning depends on the class situation,” he said in his 1939-

²¹⁹See, for instance, Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences*; Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*; and Nicholas Ridout’s *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*.

1940 lecture “On Experimental Theatre.” “Artistic appreciation depends on one’s political attitude, which can accordingly be stimulated and adopted.”²²⁰ The dissection of the audience by class is a Marxist strategy, of course, and we now consider the multiple political and class identities that layer every spectator’s experience. However, the basic function of Brecht’s dialectical endeavor is, I believe, still operative: people still go to the theatre, after all, to be entertained and (ideally) to be intellectually stimulated. The hypothetical spectator does, in fact, enter the theatre with a general political attitude, and the theatre (as an artistic apparatus) holds the potential to stimulate critical reflection on the very generalities of this perspective.

Moreover, at a basic level of theatre-going, we must accept the individual as a receptive unit within the present group. In *Utopia and Performance*, Jill Dolan reminds us of the collectivity in theatre-going that ought not to be dismissed:

When I see people converge, and when I’m part of that convergence, I’m already moved by this demonstration of community, by the faith we’ve brought to the importance of gathering together. The act of coming, of showing up, signals to me that communities still constitute themselves around the importance of physical presence.²²¹

Dolan’s emphasis on the constitutive performance of collectivity reminds us, importantly, of the necessary consideration of live presence when analyzing dramatic affect. Wright correctly critiques the “collective subject” as an impossibly homogenous political body, but nevertheless the aesthetics of performance includes the performance of *community*. A key tool of Brechtian theory is its foregrounding of the extant theatrical apparatus in its respective society—a community of spectators. The base product of the dialectical theatre is change in individual and collective human action, and the Brechtian project continues in a post-communist world, as an instrument for historically-conditioned political action towards socialist equality. In

²²⁰ Brecht, “On Experimental Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 132.

²²¹ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 96.

the process of a fun evening's out at the theatre, "every manifold, complicated, contradictory relationship between the individual and society can be examined."²²²

The contradictory relationships performed in the theatre can be taken a step further to play out the contradictory relationships within the individual, as well.²²³ The dialectic of historical conditions and experience in Brecht's later (epic) works exhibits an equal (however different from the early Brecht) potential for postmodern sensibility. As chapter one demonstrates, an important element of a postmodern approach is the embrace of play and the abandonment of the totality of presence. A postmodern interpretation of Brechtian theatre might de-stabilize a social structure that embraces "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process," as Fredric Jameson describes the conditions of late-capitalism.

Comedy, Commitment and Capitalism: Brecht in the 1960s

Brecht continually referenced history as a model for patterns of material conditions, as source material for exploring human exploitation and blindness. This critical archaeology extended to dramatic history as well, and he was (with the help of his numerous collaborators and dramaturgs²²⁴) a notorious adapter of other materials. Regarding the use of dramatic classics, he writes, we "must bring out the ideas originally contained in it; we must grasp its national and at the same time its international significance, and to this end must study the historical situation prevailing when it was written, also the author's attitude and special peculiarities."²²⁵ The study of the historical situation prevailing when it was written does not, however, indicate a

²²² Brecht, "Die Dialektik zum Theater," 922.

²²³ Elin Diamond, for instance, applies Brechtian theory to illustrate contemporary feminist critiques in the theatre, and Loren Kruger has analyzed the importance of the Brechtian schema to post-imperial critiques in international theatre. (See Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*; Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht*.)

²²⁴ John Fuegi's *Brecht and Company: sex, political and the making of modern drama* provides extensive archival evidence of the significant work done by Brecht's collaborators, especially Elisabeth Hauptmann, Ruth Berlau, and Margarete Steffin.

²²⁵ Brecht, "Classical Status as an Inhibiting Factor," in *Brecht on Theatre*, 272.

duplication of the historical production. The use of entertainment in general, and comedy in particular, is a key strategic trope in his schema for a new theatrical practice. His lecture on the “Experimental Theatre” explains that the new, epic style of production is not to be seen as *the* new style, a definite result of experiments: “It is *a* way, the one *we* have followed. The effort must be continual. The problem holds for all art, and it is a vast one.”²²⁶ One of the key handicaps in the emergence of Brechtian drama and theory in the Anglo-American arena in the early 1960s was the tendency to keep Brecht in a historical diorama, as it were: perpetually playing in a realm of Continental tensions between fascists, bourgeois capitalists, and homegrown communist movements. The political commitment inherent in the epic works thus risked being interpreted as historic expressions of European communism, rather than a working-through of a Marxist philosophy of history and a transnational protest against the profoundly *undemocratic* nature of free-market capitalism.

The issue of political commitment in art was a particularly heated issue at this moment, and the role of Brecht as a “committed” playwright was one of the subtexts of a notorious debate between the London theatre critic Kenneth Tynan and the French Absurdist playwright Eugène Ionesco in the late 1950s. In a 1958 review of Ionesco’s *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*, revived at the English Stage Company, Tynan (wickedly comparing them to shaggy-dog stories) attacks Ionesco’s general stance against realism, in all of its varieties, which Tynan is careful to note include a wide range of form and language from Chekhov, Miller, Williams, and O’Casey to Brecht, Osbourne and Sartre. An “escape from realism,” Tynan argues, is and can only be a diversion, and in a postscript to his review,²²⁷ he expands his critique to a larger attack on the revived *l’art pour l’art* stance. “M. Ionesco,” Tynan accuses, “is in danger...of

²²⁶ Brecht, “On the Experimental Theatre,” 135.

²²⁷ Tynan, review of *The Chairs* and *The Lesson* at the Royal Court, in *Curtains*, 407-409.

locking himself up in that hall of mirrors which in philosophy is known as solipsism.”²²⁸ Susan Sontag implicitly sided with Tynan in her 1964 *New York Review of Books* article on Ionesco, in which she decides that “[w]hen Ionesco says, ‘I believe that what separates us all from one another is simply society itself, or, if you like, politics,’ he is expressing his anti-intellectualism rather than a position about politics.”²²⁹ But to set Ionesco’s Absurd treatment of social relations at the opposite pole from Brecht’s estranging treatment of historical dialectics is to reduce their artistic value to explicit intent, rather than to appreciate their shared stance of aesthetics-as-ideology-critique. Ionesco repeated asserted that he wrote from a position of anti-engagement, eschewing any stance of political commitment. He expressed, however, shrewd insight into the power of resistance inherent in art as a form of inquiry and expression that refuses to pattern itself on a pre-existing ideology: “a work of art which is only ideological, and nothing else, is useless, tautological, inferior to the doctrine which it expresses; it could be better expressed in the language of demonstration and debate...In my opinion, a work of art has a system of expression which is its own, its own means of direct apprehension of reality.”²³⁰ Both playwrights were, ultimately, representatives of what Robert Brustein called “The Theatre of Revolt”—they simply were representatives, in his schema, of *social revolt* and *existential revolt*, respectively. “[I]f politics is the art of the possible, art is the politics of the impossible—the free artist would sooner sacrifice the world than relinquish the integrity of his vision,” Brustein wrote in his 1964 book; “The artist lives in compromised reality, but he lives in another world as well, the world of the imagination, and there his vision is pure and absolute.”²³¹

²²⁸ Tynan, “Postscript on Ionesco,” in *Curtains*, 409-410.

²²⁹ Sontag, “Ionesco,” in *Against Interpretation*, 122.

²³⁰ Ionesco, “Le rôle du dramaturge,” from *Notes et contre-notes* (originally published in 1962).

Translated and quoted in Wulbern, *Brecht and Ionesco*, 13.

²³¹ Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, 416.

Theodor Adorno placed Brecht in an aesthetic polar opposition to Samuel Beckett in his important 1962 essay “On Commitment.” Adorno argues that committed art ought “to work at the level of fundamental attitudes...[and] what gives commitment its esthetic advantage over tendentiousness also renders the content to which the artist commits himself inherently ambiguous.”²³² Adorno agrees that “Brecht’s claim that he used his theatre to make men think was justified,” but he approaches the concept of commitment in Brecht’s works through an analysis of form, positing that the “task of an immanent critique, which alone is dialectical, is rather to synthesize assessment of the validity of his forms with that of his politics.”²³³ His analysis determines that Brecht’s plays fail due to their allegorical nature: Brecht’s “attempt to reconstruct the reality of society thus led first to a false social model and then to dramatic implausibility.”²³⁴ Adorno finds potential socio-political critique instead in the “autonomous” aesthetics of Beckett, for “the less works have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right; and the less they need a surplus of meaning beyond their being...By dismantling appearance, [Kafka and Beckett] explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance.”²³⁵ Elizabeth Wright, in a comprehensive summary of Adorno’s critique of Brecht, notes that Adorno’s argument is bound by his resistance to any cultural form that is taken up on a “popular level”; moreover, he “has no notion how a change of consciousness might lead to a change in social conditions, or how intellectual praxis related to social praxis.”²³⁶ Adorno’s search for an immanent critique of form in art is

²³² Adorno, “On Commitment,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 303-304.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 309.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 311. For an explanation of the varying analyses of “allegory” in critical theory, see Andrew Arato, “Introduction: Esthetic Theory and Cultural Criticism” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (212-214).

²³⁵ Adorno, “On Commitment,” 314-315.

²³⁶ Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 85.

connect to his avoidance of the messy, phenomenological community of spectators that effects the theatrical event.

Among English language critics, in addition to Tynan, Eric Bentley is an example of a critic who was keenly invested in the material production of Brechtian theatre in the Anglo-American world. In his essay on “The Theatre of Commitment,” originally delivered as a lecture at Brandeis University in 1966, Bentley outlined the positions of “Commitment or Alienation,” the theme of the literary conference.²³⁷ He also holds that an “autonomous” work of art (his examples include Beckett’s plays and Pasternak’s poetry) can achieve a gesture of commitment through the action of its production. “We have to concede also that silence is an act, and an act of courage, when speaking out in conformity and flattery is expected of one,” Bentley writes; “[t]his sequence [of production] indicates a Commitment, a protest against politics that itself implies a politics.”²³⁸ But Bentley also embraces what he calls “Theatre of Commitment” as a potentially effective form of cultural expression, and he connects mass communication with political/social/economic commitment:

the ideal audience for the Theatre of Commitment is, I think, neither one set of militants nor the other, but rather a mass of people in the middle, who may be vaguely sympathetic to the cause preached but are a little sluggish and sleepy about it. They may assent but they are not really committed, and the purpose of the Drama of Commitment is not to be *for* Commitment [to a specific doctrine] but to get people to commit themselves.²³⁹

He advises the Anglo-American audience at this time that commitment is best realized through a commitment to critical thinking, an argument that directly engages with the critical American concern about the pre-packaged liberalism of middlebrow culture, as described in the previous chapter. Bentley references Brecht’s open-ended, historical

²³⁷ Bentley, “The Theatre of Commitment,” in *The Theatre of Commitment*, 190-231. Bentley’s centrality in the dissemination of Brecht’s works in English will be considered in chapter 3.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

epic theatre and likens the strategy to the older genre of tragi-comedy, describing as “bitter” the conclusion that is not conclusive: neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but open at the end. Bentley’s essay also hearkens back to the long legacy of satirical ambiguity in Western drama, a comic structure that does not offer a resolution within the work of art.

In France, while Louis Althusser was publishing his important revisions of Marxist political theory, he also, like Roland Barthes, wrote explicitly about the Brechtian theatre. In a 1962 essay written for a French communist magazine, *Esprit*, Althusser reads the reception dynamics of the epic theatre alongside a close analysis of the Marxist philosophy of consciousness, arguing for a productive space on the fine line between the inescapable false consciousness of the dominant ideology and a self-recognition of the site of false consciousness.²⁴⁰ Like many twentieth-century Marxist theorists who struggled with the philosophical dilemma of assumed (reified) individual and collective subjectivities, Althusser hit upon the complications of spectatorship in Brechtian theory: how do we chart a vector for the sites of a spectator’s (false) consciousness and the demonstrated (false) consciousness of the characters in their own historical context on stage? Althusser describes the stage-work as allowing for a de-centering of a site of consciousness, for the dynamics of estrangement ensure that “the center is always deferred.” The paradox of Marxist theories of reception remains; that is, the spectator himself cannot help but see and live the play “in the mode of a questioned false consciousness.”²⁴¹ This act of questioning, however, is “the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition,” a recognition moreover that is not a set dialectic between self and not-self. Rather, “the theatre’s object is to destroy this intangible image, to set in motion the immobile, the eternal

²⁴⁰ Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht: Notes on a Materialist Theatre,” in *For Marx*, 131-151. Originally published Dec. 1962 in *Esprit*.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

sphere of the illusory consciousness's mythical world.”²⁴² Contrary to Adorno's analysis, Althusser saw the allegorical qualities of Brechtian history as a source of subversion. Althusser understood that the monumental importance of Brecht's theatre theory is its realization that the theatre must not be the source of commentary: it is instead to be a location to set something in motion, to carve out a space for critical development which, hopefully, will lead to political engagement outside the theatre.

As the previous chapter outlined, there was a particular recuperation of avant-garde aesthetics at this moment which informed this (committed) dialogue regarding political engagement in the theatre, an important critical context for the material context of theatre production. Brecht's unique position with regards to the “historical” avant-garde project, his specific artistic techniques, and the critical goals of a dialectical theatre were not fully realized in the English-speaking world just as yet. For one thing, Brecht's critical essays were not made available in English at the same pace as the plays.²⁴³ Yet American theatre practitioners were excited by the plays' potential as provocative entertainment, and the early, successful production of *The Threepenny Opera* that ran off-Broadway at the Theatre de Lys for seven years and 2,611 performances indicated the potential audience for Brechtian satire in the New York theatre.

Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera), Brecht's adaptation of John Gay's 1728 smash hit *The Beggar's Opera*,²⁴⁴ with music by Kurt Weill, premiered in Berlin in the fall of 1928 and became a smash hit in its own right, 200 years after the original, and it played in various theatres throughout Germany until the Nazis took

²⁴² Ibid., 149; 151.

²⁴³ Grove Press, the initial publisher of Brecht's work in translation, came out with Eric Bentley's edited *Seven Plays* in 1961, with individual plays in translation following. John Willett's collection of Brecht's essays, *Brecht on Theatre*, did not appear until 1964 (Hill and Wang). The dissemination and circulation of Brecht's work in text and in production is further analyzed in chapter 3.

²⁴⁴ Brecht worked from Elisabeth Hauptmann's translation of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*.

power in 1933. *The Threepenny Opera* remains by and large faithful to the 18th century English original, although Brecht moved the setting to 1830s London: Macheath, the leader of a robber network, marries Polly Peachum, the daughter of the head of the beggars' union. Mr. and Mrs. Peachum, outraged by their daughter's (questionable) marriage, blackmail the Police Chief Tiger Brown to arrest his friend Macheath by threatening to disrupt the Queen's Coronation ceremony with a mob of beggars blocking the streets of London. Despite aid from his former lover Lucy (Tiger Brown's daughter), Macheath is arrested twice due to his compulsive need to make his weekly appointment at the local brothel. The thief is rescued on the gallows by a *deus ex machina* in the form of a Queen's messenger, issuing him a pardon, a title, and an estate. The original, and its adaptation, are satirical on two levels: they are at once formal parodies of operatic and musical conventions, and social satires on networks of mutual corruption.

Despite its enormous success in Germany, *The Threepenny Opera* did not resonate with American audiences when it first appeared in New York in 1933, in a translation (apparently now lost) by Gifford Cochran and Jerrold Krinsky: the show closed after twelve performances. In 1950, however, American writer-composer Marc Blitzstein, who had become an acquaintance of Brecht during his brief 1935 visit to New York, showed Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya a translation he had done of the song "Pirate Jenny," and, encouraged by them, he completed a full translation/adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*, which was first performed at Brandeis University in 1952 with Leonard Bernstein conducting.²⁴⁵ Blitzstein continued to tinker with the adaptation, and in March 1954 it opened at the small (299-seat) Theatre de Lys in Greenwich Village, mounted by independent producers Carmen Capalbo and Stanley

²⁴⁵ Howard Taubman recounted this story in a March 7, 1954 *New York Times* piece, "Musical With a Heritage."

Chase. This time, the response was remarkable: the small production even warranted a review in *TIME* magazine, which lauded Weill's score, but passed on the content of the show itself. The reviewer grumbles about the "bitter speeches of social protest, written in a heavy Teutonic style," and states that it "bogs down in prosy prose and amateurish acting."²⁴⁶ The review for the *New York Times* likewise noted "rough" and inexperienced performances, but applauded what he saw as Blitzstein's adaptation that retained "the bite, the savage satire, the overwhelming bitterness underlying this work."²⁴⁷ The production was notable for its use of eight instruments, in accordance with Weill's original orchestration, and it featured Weill's widow Lotta Lenya in the role of Jenny Diver, which she originated for the 1928 Berlin production and the 1930 Pabst film. Lenya featured heavily in the marketing for the show, and when it had to close in May (the theatre had another booking), a vigorous campaign by *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson led to a re-mounting of the production, which opened again at the de Lys in September 1955 and ran continuously until December of 1961. At the time of its closing it was, with 2,611 performances, the longest-running off-Broadway show of all time.

It is a curious discrepancy, this extraordinary shift in reception from 1933 to 1955, and although it certainly may stem from the changing tastes in music (for Kurt Weill's score was, in 1954 and 1955, soundly admired), the impact of the show's satirical content must also be unpacked. The pointed difference between the *New York Times* assessment and that of *TIME* magazine is worth taking into account. While the middlebrow, national periodical found the satire heavy and bogged down, the preeminent judge of the New York theatre found it a strong "modern gem."²⁴⁸ This reviewer's interpretation of the satire, however, is softer than one familiar with

²⁴⁶ *TIME* magazine, "Old Beggar in Manhattan," Monday March 22, 1954.

²⁴⁷ L.F., "At the Theatre: Blitzstein's Adaptation," *New York Times* March 11, 1954.

²⁴⁸ L.F., "'The Threepenny Opera' Comes Back," *New York Times* September 21, 1955.

the original work might suspect. The production was read as a bittersweet romp, for “[a]lways underneath the hard exterior of this tale about misery and muggs [sic] in London’s underworld there is the pervading sorrow and heartbreak.”²⁴⁹ This is in part due to the interpretation of the music, which this reviewer found “yearning and humorous, cynical and sad,” “poignant,” and “haunting.” Weill’s ballads and marches (such as “Pirate Jenny,” “The Ballad of Comfortable Living,” and “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency”) might be interpreted as musically poignant only when heard independently of their content, for the grittiness and, indeed, crassness of the songs is placed in an ironic dialogue with the Jazz-Age contagiousness of the tunes. Brecht and Weill adopted this dynamic of formal irony from Gay’s original, in which, for example, a lyric such as “If you mention vice or bribe,/’Tis so pat to all the tribe,/Each cries, ‘That was leveled at me’” was set to popular tune known as “How Happy Are We.”²⁵⁰ A prominent reason for the softening of the irony, and thereby the musical satire, was the tone of Blitzstein’s translation. Beginning with “Die Moritat” (known in English as “Mack the Knife”), the Blitzstein adaptation smoothed out much of the sardonic juxtapositions of Brecht’s original lyrics. The mystery of the elusive criminal, whose work is described in ugly detail in the jaunty tune, is rendered whimsical by Blitzstein’s “Did our boy do something wrong?”, and the grimmest images are omitted (bodies sinking into the gray Thames; the rape of a young widow; a housefire that kills an entire family).²⁵¹ Mrs. Peachum’s “Ballad of Dependency” is similarly cleansed, beginning with the fact that the concept of *Hörigkeiten* is translated without its sexual connotation. In Blitzstein’s verse, Mrs. Peachum describes Mack’s weakness for “wenches” without calling him a whore-mongering dog (“*Der frechste*

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Gay, *The Beggar’s Opera*, ed. Roberts, 48.

²⁵¹ Blitzstein, “Vocal Selections from *The Threepenny Opera*.” The full libretto for the Blitzstein adaptation has never been published.

Hund! Der Schlimmste Hurentreiber! Wer kocht ihn ab, der alle abkocht?

Weiber.”)²⁵² The “Cannon Song” (translated as “Army Song”) retains the black comedy of the original, but Blitzstein’s lyrics again fall on the side of lyrical or whimsical:

Blitzstein: “If we get feeling down/We wander into town/and if the population/should greet us with indignation/we chop ’em to bits because we like our hamburgers raw!”

Brecht: “*Wenn es mal regnete/ Und es begegnete/ Ihnen ’ne neue Rasse/ ’ne braune oder blasse/ Da machen sie vielleicht daraus ihr Beefsteak Tartar.*”

Close Translation: “And when it’s raining/ We’d stop campaigning/and find the native races/ with brown or with yellow faces/ and that way we could enjoy some fresh-made Beefsteak-Tartar!”

Blitzstein’s translation, while assuredly sarcastic, loses Brecht’s specific Kiplingesque²⁵³ bite, which juxtaposes the ugly truth of British imperial oppression (the brutal disposability of brown races) with the ludicrous (the elegance of Beefsteak-Tartar). Macheath’s and Jenny’s “Tango-Ballad,” as well, omits the gritty details in the third verse about Jenny’s miscarriage going down the drain (“*Das aber dann doch in die Binsen gehen sollte*”). While hewing close to the larger sense of the original, Blitzstein nevertheless adjusted the tone in adapting the work. In cleaning up the dirtiest parts of the lyrics, Blitzstein tinkered with the irony of the musical: the wonderful friction of distaste and attraction, achieved through gritty lines.

In summary, the adaptation omits the sense of *verrecken*—of coming to a rotten end, of a miserable death—that is repeated throughout the original. Judging from the production photographs as well, the casting of Scott Merrill as Macheath also contributed to the “gentrification,” so to speak, of the production: in his 30s and attractive, Merrill (described as “dapper, tough, and suave”²⁵⁴) was a younger and

²⁵² Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, 51.

²⁵³ The influence of Kipling on Brecht’s dramaturgy goes back to the earliest formation of *Mann ist Mann* in the early 1920s, as John Willett and Ralph Manheim have pointed out (“Introduction,” *Man Equals Man*, ix-x).

²⁵⁴ L.F., “‘The Threepenny Opera’ Comes Back,” *Times* September 21, 1955.

sexier Macheath than that described by Brecht as utterly bourgeois, “utterly staid...[whose] regular and pedantically punctual visits to a certain Turnbridge coffee-house [i.e., the brothel] are *habits*, whose cultivation and proliferation is perhaps the main objective of his correspondingly bourgeois life.”²⁵⁵ On the other hand, as Brecht’s English editors John Willett and Ralph Manheim have pointed out, Brecht’s clear outline for a subversive critique of bourgeois society came after the fact. They argue that the work as originally written and presented, in 1928, was characterized by a “largely irresponsible lightheartedness,” and that only by looking backwards and through a new interpretation can the work sustain any claim to capitalist critique. Brecht’s later interpretation was informed by the radical revision he devised in 1930 for the G.W. Pabst film version, a revision which was abandoned by the producers and director for a more faithful recreation of the original stage production.²⁵⁶ However, even without the overt gesture of transforming Polly and Macheath into successful bankers, Brecht’s notes for the actors provide a blueprint for a sardonic, ironic portrayal of business transactions and corruption at all levels of society, a blueprint that may or may not be superimposed on the original production but nevertheless remains as a valuable application of Brechtian theory.

From a broader perspective, the success of the Theatre de Lys production of *The Threepenny Opera* can be taken as evidence of a new receptivity for Brecht’s particular mixture of dark satire with unabashed popular entertainment, in large part achieved no doubt by Kurt Weill’s brilliant score. In fact, the production was billed as “Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera*, English translation and adaptation by Marc

²⁵⁵ Brecht, “Notes to *The Threepenny Opera*,” in *The Threepenny Opera*, ed. Willett and Manheim, 92. Written in 1931.

²⁵⁶ Brecht was dismissed from the film project by the production company Nero-Film in the summer of 1930 after presenting his new scenario, and the script was instead completed by Béla Balázs. Brecht’s bitterness over his loss of control over the film resulted in a long essay, “Der Dreigroschenprozess,” and he subsequently transformed his revised scenario into novel form with the *Dreigroschenroman*. (Willett and Manheim, “Introduction,” *The Threepenny Opera*, xiii-xiv).

Blitzstein”: Brecht got third billing. If, upon close inspection, the Blitzstein version threw more weight on the side of entertainment rather than overt political critique, nevertheless it achieved a stark, satiric alternative to both the contemporaneous American musical theatre and the available political or social plays.²⁵⁷ Walter Kerr, for instance, reviewing the production for the New York *Herald Tribune*, admired Weill’s genius in balancing melody and sharpness: “Both are there, the melody stirring up an active delight, the unmistakable malice giving it unexpected teeth.”²⁵⁸ Looking back in 1955 on the success of the original 1928 production of *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht reasoned that one of the successful results of the production was “the fact that the top stratum of the bourgeoisie was made to laugh at its own absurdity. Having once laughed at certain attitudes, it would never again be possible for these particular representatives of the bourgeoisie to adopt them.”²⁵⁹ Aware that the theatrical apparatus is always complicit with its social environment, Brecht still hoped that the play could “fulfill the same function in capitalist countries today so long as people understand how to provide entertainment and, at the same time, bite instead of mere cozy absurdity.”²⁶⁰ While the long-running production at the small, off-Broadway Theatre de Lys may not have been apparent as a teeth-baring satire of the middle-class, it certainly challenged the New York theatre scene’s sense of “cozy” musical theatre. The overwhelming success of this production served as an early indicator of a changing receptiveness to the juxtaposition of comic entertainment and dark social critique.

²⁵⁷ Hits of the 1955-1956 season included the dramas *The Diary of Anne Frank*; Jean Giradoux’s *Tiger at the Gates*; and Michael Gazzo’s *A Hatful of Rain*. The hit comedies included *The Matchmaker*, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter*, and Ira Levin’s adaptation of *No Time for Sergeants*. Also premiering were the Lerner and Lowe musical *My Fair Lady* and the Loesser musical *The Most Happy Fellow*. Source: The Internet Broadway Database.

²⁵⁸ Kerr, “*The Threepenny Opera*” (review), *New York Herald Tribune* Wednesday September 21, 1955.

²⁵⁹ Hans-Joachim Bunge, “On a New Production of *The Threepenny Opera*: a conversation between Brecht and Giorgio Strehler,” in *The Threepenny Opera*, eds. Willett and Manheim, 102.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Conclusion

The historical avant-garde, Huyssen reminds us, although “aesthetically and politically the most fascinating component of modernity,” is nevertheless still modernism by nature of its “universalizing and totalizing gesture.”²⁶¹ There is an active tension between modernist rationality and postmodern chance inherent in the overall schema of Brecht’s theatre theory: the *Verfremdungseffekt*, a rational device for the active production of meaning, is a tool for a dialectical theatre that puts into play “the instability of every circumstance.” The essence of what Brecht dubbed the “joke of contradictions” and the withholding of a polemical resolution link the Brechtian schema for production and reception to a postmodern method of political and social critique through a comedy of ambiguity. This is an irony of perpetual contradiction,²⁶² extending beyond the theatre-as-place-of-play: it is up to you, the audience, to continue the play. The elements of the historical avant-garde inherent in Brecht’s work opened the door for a mainstream reception to the Brechtian techniques of *Verfremdung* and episodic dramaturgy. Brecht is, however, a predominant symptom of “postmodernism’s problematic relationship to the modernist tradition and its claims to difference.”²⁶³ The challenge at this historical moment was to realize the postmodern comic potential within the Brechtian dialectical theatre.

Elizabeth Wright, analyzing Brecht’s methodology in a later theoretical context, reminds us of the intrinsic importance of historical context when considering Brecht’s project: “Brecht’s aesthetic is based upon a view of the text that has become

²⁶¹ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 175.

²⁶² There is also an important theorization of irony as a Romantic mechanism, a closed system such as that deconstructed by Jacques Derrida in his early essays (see chapter 1): this is a dialectics of irony that is interpreted in the Hegelian pattern of achieving a synthesis of the subject and its contemplation of its own consciousness as a “hovering” totality, in contrast to the unresolvable, Nietzschean irony of the eternal, the comic negation; this is the difference between negation with and without sublation or resolution. Paul de Man has also delineated this critical pattern in his essay “Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*”; see also Peter Szondi, “Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony” for a clear description of the patterns of this “romantic,” or idealistic, aesthetic theory.

²⁶³ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 186.

mandatory in poststructuralist theory: the text as a site of production, involving author, reader, and an Other, which for Brecht is history.”²⁶⁴ Her analysis of Brecht as a postmodernist also connects the centrality of history to Brecht’s use of comedy: “For Brecht the comic is a historically bound phenomenon, something that can be used for immediate political purposes. His dialectical theatre focuses on what has become comic at a certain moment in history and has now become an anachronism. This is different from the view that regard the comic as an innate quality.”²⁶⁵ The anachronism becomes a form of improvisation with temporality, and the humor of the performance reveals the non-essential nature of historical conditions through estrangement. As the next chapter shall demonstrate, however, an overly reverential adherence to the form of Brecht’s own work produced a regressively modernist theatre, one that failed to resonate in a new historical context. Only by adapting Brechtian theory to new works and new histories would the postmodern potential of the dialectical theatre be achieved.

²⁶⁴ Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 31.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

CHAPTER 3
BRECHT IN NEW YORK AND LONDON:
HISTORY AND CRITICAL CONTEXTS

Introduction

In a 1962 article for the socialist periodical *The New Leader*, American director Alan Schneider remarked that “1961-1962 will go down in history as the season in which Brecht become not only respectable but commercial.”²⁶⁶ In London, by the end of 1963 the ubiquity of Brecht’s works and Brechtian interpretations by British directors led critic Bernard Levin (for the always conservative *Daily Mail*) to complain, “Are we going to have more of our classics forced through these Marxist imbecilities?”²⁶⁷ By 1964, Bertolt Brecht appeared to be an established figure in the New York and London circles of theatre production and criticism. This inundation of Brechtian texts and theory in New York and London did not spring up unannounced in 1960, however. Brecht’s incorporation into the mainstream English and American theatres was a slow but on-going process from his first great success in Germany (*Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1928) until the late 1950s, in the wake of the Berliner Ensemble’s first London visit (1956) and Marc Blitzstein’s hit adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* (1954, as described in the previous chapter). These appearances sparked more and more interest among British and American producers and directors, leading to what became a virtual “glut” of Brecht on stage by the 1962.

In this chapter, I trace this dissemination of Brecht’s dramas and theories, which in the early 60s unfolded in the context of on-going attempts to (re)define the “avant-garde” in relation to English and American realism. “Brecht” as an idea was

²⁶⁶ Alan Schneider, “Bringing Down the Curtain,” *The New Leader* June 25, 1962, pg. 30 (Alan Schneider Papers/Mandeville Special Collections Library/ UCSD).

²⁶⁷ Bernard Levin, *Daily Mail* review of *The Recruiting Officer*, 11 December 1963. In *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 136.

embraced by the English and American theatre practitioners as part of a recuperation and re-invention of the European, pre-war historical avant-garde; part of this process included a critical fascination with what became known as the Absurd²⁶⁸ as a re-invention of 1920s Expressionism and Surrealism. Brecht's position as an "avant-gardeist" was always a particular one, though, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. American and British directors perceived the potential for a radically new approach to theatre through an adaptation of Brecht to a new historical and cultural context, not only in the experimental companies off-off-Broadway but also in the more mainstream, widely publicized productions on- and immediately off-Broadway and in London's established theatre companies playing on the West End. But the execution of Brecht's dramas was hindered in two different ways. Where Brecht uses history as a means of demonstrating Marxist theories of society and economics, Anglo-American practitioners (and critics as well) tended to interpret the unflinching historical processes through a lens of redemptive humanism, a moderate Cold War rhetoric that abstracted social conscience, individual liberties, and rational, Platonic ethics into what theatre Bruce McConachie has called "containment liberalism."²⁶⁹ In addition to this tendency, practitioners adopted Brecht's stagecraft as a rigid formal pattern, rather than observing Brecht's own admonition to adapt to the available means of production. As Brecht stated with regards to reviving *Die Dreigroschenoper*, theatre works must "understand how to provide entertainment and, at the same time, bite instead of mere cozy absurdity."²⁷⁰ But that subversive bite will only ever be possible through a manipulation of the dominant method of production.

²⁶⁸ Following Martin Esslin's 1962 work of theatre criticism, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which shall be discussed below.

²⁶⁹ McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, 9.

²⁷⁰ Hans-Joachim Bunge, "On a New Production of *The Threepenny Opera*," in *The Threepenny Opera*, eds. Willett and Manheim, 102.

As the previous chapter argues, the political force of Brecht's popular theatre operates in part as a comic dialectic. Chapter 1 demonstrates that perceptive intellectual and cultural critics at this moment were beginning to articulate a new need for expressive and critical perspectives, ones that emphasized comedy and humor as a vital, appropriate stance towards Anglo-American culture and society: the critiques of Susan Sontag and Marshall McLuhan, for instance, serve as early models of what later became considered a postmodern sensibility. This turn towards the comic stance is not a move of political activism, but rather a creative expression of cultural resistance. Comedy becomes political in the broadest sense, as an example of confrontation through pleasure; as Northrop Frye describes the generic "mythos of irony and satire," such comedy expresses "the mythical patterns of experience, the attempts to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence."²⁷¹ This chapter demonstrates that despite this critical recognition of comedy as a political form of expression—a creative means of challenging the growing imperialism and global inequalities behind the military-industrial complex—Brecht's works were themselves not adapted to this context and were instead produced as historical lessons, rather than as critical models that reveal historical processes. By adhering to a productive model designed for a different geographical, political, and historical context, English-language directors in New York and London risked turning Brecht's works into museum pieces—the museum being a perfect example of the middlebrow culture that critics such as Dwight MacDonald were so adamantly protesting.

The Theatrical Contexts: London and New York

Bruce McConachie's work on Cold War American drama provides a useful outline of the Broadway audience after World War II: "Although the audience increased in numbers during the 1950s, its demographic base remained nearly

²⁷¹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 223.

constant...In terms of class and race...over 70 percent of theatergoers in New York in 1960 were white people from the upper-middle-class...[or] 'the professional-managerial class.'"²⁷² British statistics, on the other hand, indicate that going into the decade, the theatre audience was both growing in numbers and changing in demographics, at least in terms of education and profession statistics. A study of audience surveys indicates that by the 1960s, between 23% and 48% of the audience had completed studies in higher education, compared to 3.7% of the general population, and the audience-income statistics reveal concurrent discrepancies with that of the general population.²⁷³ These statistics are corroborated by an audience survey from the National Theatre's 1963 production of Max Frisch's *Andorra*, cited by Kenneth Tynan: "35 per cent of the audience is either teaching or being taught. A further 24 per cent consists of clerical or white-collar workers."²⁷⁴ A mid-1960s survey of National Theatre (London) audiences indicates a similar disproportionate percentage of attendees from the higher income brackets.²⁷⁵

Theatre historian Stephen Lacey describes this as part of a general process of affluence and what he calls "embourgeoisement" in British society that progressed through the 1950s; this was not so much an obliteration of financial struggle and class differences as it was a new cultural perception of general consumption and affluence as the social norm.²⁷⁶ This was intricately connected to the increasing "remorseless drift from the provinces to London," and the sustained "nationalization of culture" that

²⁷² McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, 2-3.

²⁷³ Lacey, *British Realist Theatre*, 56. Statistics quoted from Sinfield, "The theatre and its audiences," *Society and Literature*, 178.

²⁷⁴ Tynan, *Tynan Right & Left*, 171.

²⁷⁵ Sinfield, "The theatre and its audiences," 180. Interestingly, the audience demographics were not markedly different in East Berlin at this time, either; according to David Bathrick, only roughly 7% of the Berliner Ensemble audience was what would be considered "working-class," the vast majority belonging to the highly educated, white-collar demographic.

²⁷⁶ Lacey, *British Realist Theatre*, 11-13. In his Introduction to the Routledge *Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During also remarks upon this shift in general national self-perception in post-WWII Britain. See During, "Introduction," 3-4.

centered the growing media and arts-financing institutions in the capital.²⁷⁷ Theatre historian Martin Priestman, in a study of the British theatre of the 1960s, also identifies the increasing “Americanization” of British culture as a corresponding part of this myth of consumption. Arguing that the “American input, by contrast [with the European], rose to a crescendo by the end of the 1960s,”²⁷⁸ Priestman’s analysis of Edward Bond’s 1968 *Early Morning* ends with its summarization as “very much of a piece with the late-1960s’ growing perception of Britain as a consumer society, whose every enjoyment is paid for by the exploitation of someone else, somewhere.”²⁷⁹ British historian John Seed provides analysis of the relationship between the Anglo-American political relationship, the Cold War military-political pact between Britain and the United States, and the British encouragement of global capitalist industry through the 1950s, which was the socio-economic foundation leading to this shared cultural perception of affluence and improved quality of life.²⁸⁰ This shared culture, along with the similar educational and professional perspective of the mainstream Anglo-American theatre audiences, is a key link in the following comparative study of the intertwined nature of Brechtian theatre on the mainstream London and New York stage as it developed in the late 1950s and into the 1960s.

One of the most significant developments in New York theatre at the beginning of the 1960s was the transition of Off-Broadway productions to the status of “aspiring Broadway” rather than “Little Theatre.” Critic Stanley Kauffman described this transition in a 1979 article on NYC theatre for the British theatre journal *Theatre Quarterly*. Kauffman states that Off-Broadway was established as such in 1952 with the Circle in the Square at Sheridan Square. “For about ten years OB flourished: then

²⁷⁷ Lacey, *British Realist Theatre*, 58-59.

²⁷⁸ Priestman, “A critical stage: drama in the 1960s,” in *Cultural Revolution?*, 130.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁸⁰ Seed, “Hegemony postponed,” in *Cultural Revolution?*, 22.

Broadway producers began to use it to produce shows that were on the Broadway border-line—‘almost’ commercial. The character of OB began to change from a locus of something daring to a pocket-size Broadway or a place for Broadway tryouts.”²⁸¹ This change in the financial and creative status of Off-Broadway is reflected in the Burns Mantle theatre yearbook: the 1960-1961 Season is the last volume to have separate sections for the Broadway and Off- seasons. The volume for the 1961-1962 season reveals the important news that “Kermit Bloomgarden became the first major Broadway producer to mount a play Off-Broadway.”²⁸² Fewer and fewer new works were being presented by the beginning of the decade, both on and off-Broadway, and in addition, the number of non-American plays being produced in New York began to soar. The Burns Mantle Yearbook for the 1961-1962 season indicates that “fifty per cent of the top fourteen Broadway plays...were imported from abroad.”²⁸³ This is also the first volume in the series to include a section on the European theatre outside of London and Paris.

The London theatre industry saw a similar pattern as the Off-Broadway/Broadway relationship at this time. The smaller, off-West End “experimental” theatre companies—Theatre Workshop at Theatre Royal, the Arts Theatre Club, and the English Stage Company [ESC] at the Royal Court Theatre—had become a de facto breeding-ground for new plays to transfer to the West End, and the Royal Shakespeare Company had two London theatres, including the 1,000+ seat Aldwych, and the ready ability to transfer a production to an even larger West End house. The small Arts Theatre Club, for instance, “found it harder and harder to locate good scripts that were not also eagerly sought either by West End managers, whose eyes had been opened to

²⁸¹ Kauffman, “New York: the City and the Theatre,” *Theatre Quarterly* (Winter 1979), 37.

²⁸² Hewes, ed., *The Burns Mantle Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 16.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3. These were mostly imports from London, part of the exchange that is discussed in this chapter.

the commerciality of the supposedly uncommercial play, by the Royal Court, or by Bernard Miles's Mermaid Theatre."²⁸⁴ Dominic Sheppard, in his history *British Theatre Since the War*, documents the change in the theatrical mainstream that resulted from this production-mobility. The ESC for example, founded by George Devine in 1955 to champion "the supremacy of the writer and...to re-position London theatre away from the West End's disengagement with important contemporary issues,"²⁸⁵ had a strong effect on the change in the theatre realm in general. Sheppard notes that the company's success resulted in the interest of established West End stars (including Laurence Olivier); production transfers to commercial theatres; film adaptations; and even television programs (such as the BBC's *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today*) that demonstrated the "interest in the issues of working-class realism that many Royal Court productions were raising."²⁸⁶

The origins of this new *Zeitgeist* of working-class realism is pinpointed at the year 1956, a prominent year in British theatre history for not only the ESC premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the original "Angry Young Man" play, but also for the success of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* at Theatre Workshop and the London visit of the Berliner Ensemble. In addition to these significant events, London and NY audiences the previous year, 1955, had witnessed the English-language premieres of Eugène Ionesco's *The Lesson* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In a recent *Theatre Survey* article, Melissa Dana Gibson notes the complicated conflagration of events that resulted in the "Revolution of 1956":

[Historians] tended to attack Osborne's work on its own terms, questioning the date (things didn't really change until 1959), the venue (it was really Theatre Workshop), the play (it was really *Waiting for Godot*), the avant-garde (*Look Back in Anger* was really quite a conventional play, after all), or, most

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁸⁵ Sheppard, *British Theatre Since the War*, 49.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 81, 86.

radically, the event (it was really the Berliner Ensemble visit in 1956 that changed theatre).²⁸⁷

I shall come back to these other three influences in chapter 4: the re-appearance of the “avant-garde”; Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop; and the Berliner Ensemble’s visit. Nevertheless, the “working-class realism” of Osbourne’s work was a dominant stylistic force that characterized what became known as the “New Wave.” In order to assess the historical context of the British and American theatre at the turn of the 1960s decade, we must consider the profound impact of what Stephen Lacey has termed “social realism” on Anglo-American drama and acting in the mid-twentieth century.

In *British Realist Theatre: the New Wave In Its Context, 1956-1965*, Lacey analyzes the social and artistic changes that contributed to the rise of a social realism in British drama, arguing that “it was in the discourses of realism that the project of creating a contemporary and anti-hegemonic theatre was pursued.”²⁸⁸ The Gramscian use of hegemony, approached through the lens of the contemporaneous work of cultural theorists Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, indicates the complex balance of social power (that is, the social relations within specific historical conditions) that is maintained through a shared assimilation of dominant ideologies. This social realism was a new dramatic style that explored the social experience of contemporary Britain, especially class identity. The predominantly working-class realist plays that Lacey investigates, such as those by Osbourne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, Ann Jellicoe, Alun Owen, and Brendan Behan, were anti-hegemonic in their re-invention of character and class on the mainstream British stage. They examined working-class perceptions of the growing national affluence; changes in employment opportunities; and gender politics in a changing Britain. Lacey’s astute analysis reveals how,

²⁸⁷ Gibson, “1979 and All That,” *Theatre Survey* 47:1 (May 2006), 47fn1.

²⁸⁸ Lacey, *British Realist Theatre*, 39.

although not necessarily naturalist or photographic-realist plays in staging and construction, the predominant working mode of mid-century British theatre did “not so much reject the dominant conventions of realist drama as rework them from within, shifting them in apparently small, yet significant ways.”²⁸⁹ The New Wave of British drama was still based on a foundation of naturalist dialogue, a tight narrative form that centered around a limited number of characters (often a family), and conflicts that play out “largely in psychological terms.”²⁹⁰ The changes “from within” manifested themselves visually, through the frequent abandonment of the traditional box-set and the use of projections on the backdrops; and occasionally through metatheatrical turns through dialogue or songs directed to the audience, such as in Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey*, Behan’s *The Hostage*, and John Osbourne’s *The Entertainer*.

An additional dimension of contemporary realism as suggested by Raymond Williams, Lacey points out, is a formal intervention in dramatic form that presents a political interpretation, showing the way “things really are.”²⁹¹ Williams’s description of a political, contemporary realism corresponds with Brecht’s argument that “*Realist* means: laying bare society’s causal network / showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators...”²⁹² Lacey argues that one of the reasons for the impact of working-class realism on the British theatre scene stemmed from the above-mentioned change in affluence that, paradoxically, was changing the nature of class-identity in Britain. These new dramas

put patterns of leisure and the working-class ‘way of life’...in both its traditional and affluent forms, under the microscope—patterns which required new types of analysis, and a different kind of cultural response...public discourses about the nature of ‘what Britain is like’ in the period were

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 103.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 103-105.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁹² Brecht, “The Popular and the Realistic,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 109. Essay first published posthumously in 1958 in *Sinn und Form*, No. 4.

concerned primarily with the supposed disappearance of class in general, and of the working class in particular, and with the landscape of affluence.²⁹³

In a way, Lacey continues, the success of the working-class drama—seen by its incorporation into the larger theatres of London—served as an “alternative imagery” of changing social experience, especially in southern England and the environs of London as the post-war economy really took off. One of the key distinguishing features of this imagery is a focus on “outsider” characters: characters who are socially marginal, marked as “others” in various ways (convicts; homosexuals; people of color), or dislocated or in conflict with their origins.²⁹⁴ In this respect, the social realist British drama of the late 1950s through the early 1960s was very similar to the American drama of “containment liberalism” that dominated the U.S. stage at the same time, as considered by Bruce McConachie.

In *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, McConachie analyzes the anxious identity crises inherent in what he schematizes as middleclass, American drama of containment liberalism. His premise utilizes cognitive science theories to map the political pragmatics of containment policy onto a larger, shared social perceptive framework: “containers and their entailments pervaded cold war culture.”²⁹⁵ He groups the characters of these mainstream hits into categories similar to the antiheroes of the concurrent British social realism: the large sections focus on dramas of “Empty Boys” (such as *The Seven Year Itch*); “Family Circles” (e.g., *A Raisin in the Sun*); and “Fragmented Heroes” (*J.B.* and virtually all of Elia Kazan’s directorial work). These plays are not necessarily naturalist in construction, and very

²⁹³ Lacey, *British Realist Theatre*, 73-74.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹⁵ McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, 12. The policy of containment was introduced by President Truman’s foreign policy director George F. Kennan, who first publicly presented the concept in an (anonymous) 1947 article for the journal *Foreign Affairs*: “it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies” (“The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 575).

few of them would be considered to be photographic realism; as McConachie points out, there is a huge stylistic shift from the social-political dramas of the 1930s.²⁹⁶ The mid-20th century American dramas of *Fragmented*, *Empty Boys* are described as “subjective realism,” a term McConachie borrows from critic Brenda Murphy.²⁹⁷ These plays at times exhibited metatheatrical or expressionistic gestures, but were constructed as contemporary social dramas characterized by an individual’s psychological struggle with society and a containment of interpretation into schemas of “inside” and “outside.” McConachie, describing the abstracted designs of Jo Mielziner, argues that “the era of gauze and toothpicks took the spectators’ minds off the material conditions that shaped dramatic characters and allowed more Platonic, universal considerations to influence their impressions; in short, away from materiality and history and toward abstraction and allegory.”²⁹⁸ The psychological, subjective realism of the (middleclass, white, male) protagonist is akin to the working-class identity struggles of the protagonists of British social realism. This keen focus upon the subjective realism of psychological studies and character-driven action is intricately bound up with the growing postwar popularity of Freudian analysis, as McConachie points out, an interest that lent even more authority to the dominant Method strategy of acting in American theatre and film. The interest in analyzing drama through the lens of psychoanalysis is exemplified by the 1955 study *Freud on Broadway*.²⁹⁹ This intent interest in the unconscious motivations, neuroses, and inner conflicts of the American character inspired a theatre of subjective realism and metatheatricality rather than photographic realism, such as with Willy Loman’s daydream sequences and the fantasies of *The Seven Year Itch*. However, as Lacey

²⁹⁶ Brecht’s introduction to the New York political theatre of the 1930s, his ill-fated 1935 production of *The Mother*, shall be considered below as part of the history of Brecht reception in the U.S.

²⁹⁷ McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, 48.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

²⁹⁹ Sievers, *Freud on Broadway*.

argues with the British New Wave, which changed the dramaturgical dynamics of realism “from within,” the American drama of “containment liberalism” was still a “safe mix of realism and romanticism from earlier decades, sometimes tweaking its photographic surface to heighten dramatic effects but remaining true to its materialist premises and allowing substantial room for historical agency.”³⁰⁰ The heightened theatricality of these mid-century Anglophone realisms was enhanced by the increasing visibility of new dramatic experiments that were, on the whole, coming out of France at the time: the development of a new, post-World War II avant-garde thus became one of the main focuses of drama critics on both sides of the Atlantic.

The 1955 book *Freud on Broadway* offers a wonderful example of the mid-century American critical perception of the historical avant-garde, at least with regards to its theatrical legacy. Describing the psychiatric themes of Georg Kaiser’s “neurotic” characters, David Sievers offers a basic definition of “expressionism” and notes that “if the precedent in form came from German and Scandinavian drama, it was not until it drew upon the subject matter of Viennese psychiatry that expressionism made any headway in the American theatre.”³⁰¹ Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide* demonstrates that modernism, the avant-garde, and mass culture are inextricably intertwined despite their particular definitions, and that the relationship between these aesthetic discourses had important distinctions as it played out in America (and, in light of the above outline of shared postwar structure of feelings, I would add Britain) and in Continental Europe. The new emergence after World War II of what Peter Bürger termed a “neo” avant-garde was a significant artistic development in both the visual arts and in the theatre, with for example the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollack, the Pop art of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy

³⁰⁰ McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, 53.

³⁰¹ Sievers, *Freud, on Broadway*, 85. I would like to think that the play on “making headway” was intended.

Warhol, and the provocative productions of the Living Theatre.³⁰² As Huyssen points out, however, and as the above-quoted analysis of Sievers supports, the American artistic discourse did not have the same historical memory and horizon of expectations with regards to the historical avant-garde as there existed amongst European artists and critics, especially with regards to political urgency.³⁰³ The English stage as well, although experiencing the pre-WWII Modernist interventions of W.H. Auden, did not have an institutional memory of the historical avant-garde. With this particular horizon of expectations, the new emergence of experimental theatre was embraced by Anglo-American critics as a fresh wave of avant-garde art. This criticism did not compare the postwar experimentation with the historical avant-garde's political attacks on bourgeois institutions of art, but rather admired the psychological and existential critiques sustained in the works of Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet, for example, a continuation of Sievers' Freudian interpretation of German Expressionism.

Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, published in 1961 by Doubleday in the U.S. and in 1962 by Eyre & Spottiswoode in the U.K., was an extremely influential work of English-American drama criticism that both celebrated and analyzed the emerging names of Continental, post-WWII avant-garde theatre: Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was first introduced to the British in 1955 and to the American public in 1956. By the time of publication of Esslin's book, the first three playwrights had become known to mainstream London and New York theatre-goers through productions of *Godot*, *Rhinoceros*, *Endgame*, *The Blacks* and *The Balcony*. Esslin, a Hungarian-born critic

³⁰² Mike Sell, in *Avant-Garde Performance & the Limits of Criticism*, persuasively demonstrates how the realms of activism/art/criticism in the American "neo" avant-garde of the 1960s exhibit the frictions of the avant-garde as a practice and a discursive concept.

³⁰³ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 167. Arnold Aronson, in a recent historical survey of American avant-garde theatre, also avers that the "fundamental building blocks of a radical European avant-garde became mere stylistic conceits in the hands of most American playwrights" (*American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, 3).

who settled in England in 1939, explains in the preface his rationale for promulgating a popular understanding of the playwrights he dubs “absurd”:

The avant-garde of the theatre today is, more likely than not, the main influence on the mass media of tomorrow. And the mass media, in turn, shape a great deal of the thought and feeling of people through the Western world. Thus the type of theatre discussed in this book is by no means of concern only to a narrow circle of intellectuals. It may provide a new language, new ideas, new approaches, and a new, vitalized philosophy to transform the modes of thought and feeling of the public at large in a not too distant future.³⁰⁴

Esslin’s interest in the Absurd as a representation of a new language stems in part from a skepticism towards the shifting modern sensibilities encouraged by contemporary media: “Exposed to the incessant, and inexorably loquacious, onslaught of the mass media...the man in the street becomes more and more sceptical toward the language he is exposed to...[There is] general devaluation of language in the flood of mass communication.”³⁰⁵ Esslin suggests a purer mode of communication through the “poetic image, [which] with its ambiguity and its simultaneous evocation of multiple elements of sense association, is one of the methods by which we can, however, imperfectly, communicate the reality of our intuition of the world” (356). The Modernist legacy of fragmented expression appears here in support of the putative psychological verity of the poetic absurd.³⁰⁶ By defining the “Absurd” as a form, Esslin suggests that a reflection of the contemporary conditions of reality can be found in a poetic sensibility characterized by metaphor, surrealistic imagery, and absurd actions, characters, and situations. These Absurdist techniques could thus easily be

³⁰⁴ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* [revised edition], xiii.

³⁰⁵ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 359. Marshall McLuhan’s 1964 *Understanding Media* is a more perspicacious analysis of this moment. McLuhan’s description of “hot” and “cold” methods of information-reception is directly applied to the historical context of early 1960’s First World culture. As analyzed in Chapter 1, McLuhan’s goal is not to salvage a “new, vitalized philosophy” within established media, but rather to discern how media “alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance” (18).

³⁰⁶ This critical legacy of Modernism is articulated in, for example, Lukács’s “The Ideology of Modernism”: “Man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself” (in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, 685).

adapted into the English and American realisms that utilized metatheatricity to dramatize the psychological conflicts of the individual.

In addition to the contemporary theatre journals, both general New York and London periodicals reveal the remarkable impact of Esslin's book and the subsequent ubiquity of the "absurd" (a term which Esslin pulled from Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* and Ionesco's own writings).³⁰⁷ Director and critic Harold Clurman (a founding member of the 1930's Group Theatre) reviewed two university-press books on avant-garde drama for the *New York Times* with the headline "If the Play's Absurd, So Is Life: The Outcry of Avant-Garde Dramatists Is Based on the Facts of Our Times."³⁰⁸ Clurman describes the poetic images of Ionesco, Becket and Genet as "highly theatrical in the same sense that they are 'poetic'; they make their points through striking often grotesque images and patterns of action that are effectively apparent only when seen on the stage." On the other hand, the so-called absurdity of the new avant-garde theatre was also challenged. Edward Albee, who was included as the American representative of the Absurd in Esslin's work, had produced an article special for the *New York Times* earlier that year: "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?"³⁰⁹ Albee questions the usefulness as well as the applicability of this label to those playwrights who are being produced both in Europe and in New York to various degrees of success. His attack begins with the quip that a "theatre person of my acquaintance... remarked just the other week, 'The Theatre of the Absurd has had it; It's on its way out; it's through.'" Albee then summarizes the burgeoning (and successful) production of so-called "Absurd" playwrights both on Broadway and Off. The accompanying photos for the title page of the article include the current Off-

³⁰⁷ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 5.

³⁰⁸ Clurman, "If the Play's Absurd, So Is Life," *New York Times*, October 7, 1962. The article was a review of two recent books, *Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France* by Leonard C. Pronko, and *Four Playwrights and a Postscript: Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet* by David I. Grossvogel.

³⁰⁹ Albee, "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?", *New York Times*, February 25, 1962.

Broadway revival of *Endgame*; the 1961-1962 Broadway production of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*; the current Off-Broadway production of Genet's *The Blacks*; and the 1961 Broadway production of *Rhinoceros*, which starred Zero Mostel. At the same time, however, the playwright questioned the status of absurdity as a unifying quality to the "experimental" theatre that was taking New York by storm.

Appropriately perverse, Albee's article indicates that there is no such thing as an avant-garde "absurdist" theatre, and what's more, the absurd/avant-garde theatrical revolution is here to stay. "This theatre has no intention of running downhill," he argues from a playwright's perspective, "and the younger playwrights will make use of the immediate past and mould it to their own needs." This is tempered, however, by a prediction that "the theatre in the United States will always hew more closely to the post-Ibsen/Chekhov tradition than does the theatre in France, let us say," an acknowledgement of the American theatres' realist tendencies, which also applied to the British theatres, as described above.

Leading British drama critic Kenneth Tynan admired Esslin's thorough genealogy of the Absurd, which included "the mime plays of antiquity; to the Commedia dell'Arte; to pantomime and vaudeville; to Lear and Lewis Carroll; to Jarry, Strindberg, and the young, Rimbaud-impregnated Brecht; to the Dadaists and Tristan Tzara...; to the Surrealists and Artaud; to Kafka, and to Joyce."³¹⁰ Esslin's treatment of the theory of the Absurd, read by Tynan as largely a lesson in theatre history, reflects the resurrection of the "historical" avant-garde in this new artistic development coming out of the Continent. The self-reflexive existentialism of these dramatists, however, proved to be troublesome to Tynan, who had already established himself as Brecht's champion in the U.K. "My present response to the Absurdist (apart from Beckett)," he writes, "is to enjoy their poetry while mistrusting their

³¹⁰ Tynan, *Tynan Right and Left*, 103-104.

philosophy...The man who reacts to the universe with a cry of impotent anguish is acceptable as an artist only if he can persuade us that he has sanely considered the other possible reactions and found them inadequate...What irks one most about the Absurdist is their pervasive tone of privileged despair.”³¹¹ Michael Kustow, in the British theatre magazine *Encore* wrote perhaps the most telling review of all, damning Esslin with faint praise: “What Mr. Esslin has produced...is a splendid example of public corporation explaining, an almost civic achievement, which will do wonders as an introduction for all our theatregoers steeped in their old and square expectations of what theatrical conventions are...All becomes grist for the treadmill. Mr. Esslin’s book belongs to this world.”³¹²

All of this press about the popularization of a new avant-garde, which Martin Esslin dubbed “Absurd,” developed in tandem with the ever-increasing attention paid to the works of Bertolt Brecht in Britain and America. As the quotes at the beginning of the chapter demonstrate, by the early 1960s Brecht had become a staple in the mainstream Anglo-American repertoire, and there was a new sense that Brecht had firmly entered the horizon of expectations amongst the theatergoers mentioned by Kustow. In addition to Kenneth Tynan in England, the most important figure in bringing Brecht to the attention of the English-speaking world after World War II was Eric Bentley, who had worked directly with Brecht in Los Angeles in the 1940’s and later at the Berliner Ensemble. As an associate editor of the *Tulane Drama Review* (*TDR*), Bentley was a significant influence upon Editors-in-Chief Robert W. Corrigan, and, starting in 1962, Richard Schechner, and Bentley’s editorial correspondence reveals his forceful advice regarding translations and essays on non-English drama,

³¹¹ Ibid., 104-105. Tynan reiterated this position in his criticism of Ionesco, as discussed in chapter 2.

³¹² Kustow, “The Theatre of the Absurd,” *Encore* (July-August 1962).

especially Brecht and Artaud.³¹³ Bentley also appears to have been behind several of the *TDR* “theme” issues: a 1959 letter suggests a themed issue on “Politics and the Theatre” for prospective publication in 1961, and 1961 also saw a special issue entirely on Brecht. In a September 1960 letter, Bentley thanked Corrigan, acknowledging that “You have done royally by Brecht in *TDR*.” In England, Kenneth Tynan, writing for the *Observer*, was an extremely vocal advocate for Brecht from the mid-1950s on, and he used the Berliner Ensemble’s 1956 visit as a springboard for promoting Brecht on the English stage, and he wrote a follow-up article on the Berliner Ensemble after a trip to East Germany in 1959.

By 1962, there were three English-language monographs on what I shall encompass with the term “Brechtian project,” which includes analysis of Brecht’s prose and poetry (but predominantly the plays), his theoretical writings, and the theatrical practices of the Berliner Ensemble, as well as the history of Brecht’s productions before the Ensemble. John Willett’s *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* was published in the U.K. by Shenvall Press in 1959 and in the U.S. by New Directions. Martin Esslin’s *Brecht: The Man and His Work* (Doubleday, 1960) was published in 1959 by Eyre & Spottiswoode in England under the title *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*. In 1961, Ronald Gray’s *Brecht* was published by Oliver & Boyd in England and by Grove Press in the U.S. Meanwhile, Eric Bentley (who had included a chapter about Brecht in his 1948 book *The Playwright as Thinker*) was editing the first English-language collection of Brecht’s plays for Grove Press, the collection *Seven Plays by Brecht*, which came out in 1961 and included *In the Jungle of Cities* (translated as *In the Swamp*); *A Man’s a Man*; *St. Joan of the Stockyards*; *Galileo*; *The Good Woman of Setzuan*; *Mother Courage*; and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Although no

³¹³ All correspondence is from the Richard Schechner Papers/TDR Records, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

authoritative sales records for the original run survive, a look at royalty records indicate a print total of 30,000 copies of the Brecht collection within the first five years.³¹⁴ The publishers took great pains to distinguish the collection, soliciting and receiving a jacket quote from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and a review in *TIME* magazine. Grove Press continued to publish single and collected volumes of translated Brecht plays over the next several years, and then in 1964, the publisher Hill & Wang released John Willett's annotated selection of some of Brecht's essays and theoretical writings: *Brecht on Theatre: Towards the Development of an Aesthetic*.

The problem, for both critics and for theatre practitioners, is that Brecht was often analyzed in a compare-contrast fashion with regards to the new avant-garde—an approach that weakened the political structure of Brecht's works. When the political urgency of Brecht's works was incorporated into critical analysis, the Marxist position was more often transmuted into a message of social humanism rather than a strong economic condemnation of capitalism as a source of militarism and an anti-humanist superstructure. David Bathrick breaks down Brecht-reception in America through the 1960s into three general patterns: 1) advocates of Brecht as an artist, who nevertheless hold that art and politics must be considered as two completely separate realms; 2) those who acknowledge the importance of political theory to Brecht's work, but explain Brecht's Marxism as a psychological defense-mechanism; 3) and those who considered Brecht's Marxism to be a (contained) Communist ideology, a *Weltanschauung*.³¹⁵ None of these three interpretive strategies approach Marxism as a critical methodology in which historical materialism is at once a political and an aesthetic inquiry. Moreover, while the centrality of comedy in Brecht's work and

³¹⁴ Grove Press Records, Special Collections and Research Center, Syracuse University.

³¹⁵ Bathrick, "Brecht's Marxism and America," in *Essays on Brecht: Theater and Politics*, eds. Mews and Knust, 223-224.

theory was often critically perceived, it proved harder to manifest in the realm of theatre production outlined above.

Brecht in English: Critical Contexts and Production History

Just as he had a unique relationship to the political and productive thrust of the historical avant-garde, so did Brecht appear as an exception in the critical discussion of a post-WWII European avant-garde theatre arriving on the English-language stages. Harold Clurman's article "If the Play's Absurd," notes that while there is a "growing literature on that avant-garde movement, which has also been called 'experimental' and... 'The Theatre of the Absurd' ... what makes any strict definition of it tricky is that Brecht, while certainly 'avant-garde' and 'experimental,' is in one sense antithetical in his method and direction to such a playwright as Ionesco." Esslin, who had published monographs on both Brecht and the Absurd in 1960 and 1961, respectively, attempted to blend the two contemporary thrusts into a common project in a 1963 essay in *TDR*. He highlights their mutual theatricality, such as a break from naturalism, exhibited via the heightening of behaviors and visual imagery, and suggests that if "the Brechtian theatre in its external realism and the Theatre of the Absurd in its subjective realism each depict merely one half of reality, could not a fusion of both styles around an attempt to comprehend both sides of the coin represent a higher stage in the age-old problem of the theatre to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of depicting reality?"³¹⁶ Esslin rightly pinpoints the mutual critical importance of both aesthetic techniques: in Brecht's theatre, the "audience is forced to come to the desired conclusions by *thinking beyond* what it sees on the stage, and this is the method of the Theatre of the Absurd which also... forces each member of the audience to supply the

³¹⁶ Esslin, "Epic Theatre, the Absurd, and the Future," in *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre*, 197. Originally published in *TDR*, Vol. 7 No. 4 (Summer 1963).

meaning of the play from his own subconscious and conscious mind.”³¹⁷ However, Esslin’s synthesis focuses on the poetic genius of Brecht’s works, with close readings of the psychological complexities brought forth on stage, with a complete disregard of the crucial historical materialism that undergirds all of Brecht’s work.

In his 1960 monograph on Brecht, Esslin argues that the dramaturgical thread connecting Brecht’s works is a human battle between the rational and the instinctive, a good example of the cognitive structure of “containment” that McConachie demonstrates.³¹⁸ His analysis reduces the historically-rooted Marxist dialectic to a psychological struggle, which he then maps onto the author’s own psyche. “The conflict between subconscious instinct and rational self-control is one of the main themes of Brecht’s work,”³¹⁹ a theme which “springs from the duality of a personality deeply divided within itself.”³²⁰ Esslin interprets the “rejection” of all emotions as a symptom of this psychological conflict. A focus on psychological readings of Brecht’s characters occurs in other dramatic criticism, a symptom of the aforementioned ubiquity of psychoanalysis as a dramatic method.

In fact, a series of totalizing schemas of theatre criticism appeared in regular progression at this time, demonstrative of the pervasive “containment thinking” that was part of the culture of the cold war.³²¹ In addition to Esslin’s systematic categories of (a psychologically-driven) Brechtian theatre and Theatre of the Absurd, other examples include Lionel Abel’s 1963 study *Metatheatre* and Robert Brustein’s 1964 book *The Theatre of Revolt*. Brustein argues that the most vital and long-lasting dramas of the time belong to a “theatre of revolt.” His interpretation of Brecht begins

³¹⁷ Ibid., 198. Esslin’s essay is informed by the debate over “commitment” in the Absurd (“autonomous”) vs. Brecht (“committed”), outlined in chapter 2.

³¹⁸ Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work*, 229.

³¹⁹ Ibid. 246.

³²⁰ Ibid. 249.

³²¹ I would like to thank J. Ellen Gainor for suggesting this connection.

with an analysis of Brecht's early "neo-Romantic" artistic position, and Brustein interprets Brecht's political Marxism as an adaptation of his Romantic philosophy. Thus the fascination with the human sensory faculties (such as in *Baal* and *In the Jungle of Cities*), which Brustein called an "existential revolt," is adapted into a "Communist orthodoxy,"³²² an example of the third category of interpretation identified by Bathrick. Brecht's place within the "theatre of revolt" is directly connected to an ideological doctrine, although Brustein does perceive the complex contradictions in Brecht's narratives. "Brecht's ambivalence accounts for the dialectical power and texture of his work," Brustein writes, and he emphasizes the crucial importance of parody and irony as tools for the Brechtian dialectic.³²³ However, Brustein's final analysis is ultimately a Freudian one, a battle between Brecht's romantic-existentialist "id" and his Communist "super-ego": "How Brecht manages to maintain his skepticism, detachment, and irony while declaring his unquestioning allegiance to the Communist cause is one of the most skillful accomplishments of dramatic literature."³²⁴

Abel considers Brecht to be the "logician" of metatheatre, the dominant generic trope of modern theatre, but his analysis, like Esslin's, is focused on the treatment of individual characters rather than the comprehensive socio-political structure of the plays. Abel's book argues that self-consciousness of playwright's (and, thereby, mankind's) imagination in modern drama has obliterated the inhuman forces that define true tragedy, a shift towards "metatheatre" that he traces back to Calderón and Shakespeare. Abel argues that the unifying theme of Brecht's plays is the emphasis on corporeal, physical necessity; thus, the Brechtian theatre utilizes metatheatricity as a structure that permits narrative while rejecting the individual and

³²² Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, 250-251.

³²³ Ibid., 257-258.

³²⁴ Ibid., 258. Also see Bathrick, "Brecht's Marxism in America," 223.

the idea of individual moral suffering, resulting an anti-humanist agenda that foregrounds the material concerns of the human body in its social contexts. Abel thus side-steps the ambiguities of politics and action as functions of the human's physiological existence, using Galileo as an example, seeing the "great figure in the play *not* as a representative of human spirit at all or of the mind either, except in terms of its physical seat, the brain."³²⁵ Abel's concentration on the physicality of the Brechtian characters thus does not engage with the theoretical methodology of a Marxist historicism, wherein the truth of the individual lies in the untruth of his ideological condition, and he considers Brecht's politics to be a "distorted modern Communism, because of its philosophical basis in materialism, which was the politics of the human body and hence preferable to Western liberalism based on what he considered a false affirmation of the individual soul."³²⁶ This reading gravely reduces the Marxist political and historical dialectic of the epic narratives to an "amoral, materialist" treatment of individual human bodies.³²⁷ Abel's and Brustein's analyses of Brecht are telling examples of the Anglo-American focus on the individual character as the foundation of dramatic narrative. This reductionism is what made Brecht palatable for many.

In addition to the surfeit of critical work on Brecht, a 1963 survey of Off-Broadway productions in *TIME* magazine noted that the "remarkable six-year run of *The Threepenny Opera* at the Theater de Lys helped to detonate a Brecht boomlet that is finally exploding on Broadway with the March arrival of Brecht's best play, *Mother Courage*."³²⁸ As the previous chapter discussed, the first real post-war exposure to Brecht in New York was this hugely successful Blitzstein-adaptation of *The*

³²⁵ Abel, *Metatheatre*, 100.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

³²⁷ Incidentally, Susan Sontag took exception to Abel's analysis of Brecht in particular in her review of the book for *Partisan Review* ("The Death of Tragedy," in *Against Interpretation*, 138-139).

³²⁸ *TIME* magazine, "Off-Broadway Reckoning," Feb. 15, 1963.

Threepenny Opera at the Theatre de Lys, which was then replaced by a Brecht “revue,” *Brecht on Brecht* (opening in the winter of 1961-1962). The show was, like *Threepenny*, executed with minimal scenery, placards and exposed stage machinery, and the pick-and-choose nature of the revue included poems, and wide-ranging scenes and songs from Brecht’s works, but the omnibus goal precluded a comprehensive dialectical lesson such as is presented in the epic plays and the *Lehrstücke*. Like the historical dialectic of the narrative, theatrical style of the epic theatre was likewise reduced “from a rhetorical activity into an aesthetic object, a commodified ‘look,’” W.B. Worthen points out. “Like the politics of the text, the politics of performance are fixed within the inert textuality of a ‘Brecht style,’ rather than within the relation between actors, the play, and the audience.”³²⁹ The Burns Mantle Yearbook on the *Best Plays of 1961-1962* remarked that “[w]hile one hopes that this [enthusiastic] response heralds a new readiness for the works of a great artist previously unappreciated here, the performances [in *Brecht on Brecht*] were not very Brechtian, and the best part of the evening was supplied by Lotte Lenya’s zestful singing.”³³⁰ Even more damning was the British magazine *Encore*’s assessment of the revue. “The Americanised Brecht emerged from this production as someone sympathetic to the downtrodden but hell on commissars, a commiserator with Hitler victims and a foe of the warmakers, and certainly a man who never would employ such indiscreet words as Class Struggle, Socialism, Communism, Exploiter, Colonialism, Strike or Revolution. It was with wonder that one saw Brecht made out to be, of all strange beasts, a liberal.”³³¹

The same article commenced with a wry commentary on the surging popularity of Brecht, for all “of New York’s producers and directors...must have rushed from

³²⁹ Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, 154.

³³⁰ Hewes, ed., *The Burns Mantle Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 14.

³³¹ Baxandall, “The All-American Bert,” *Encore* (May-June 1962), 12.

their seats [at the Theatre de Lys] to the nearest phone booth where they rang up Brecht's agents and demanded an option, any option."³³² The successful *The Threepenny Opera* and the subsequent cozy revue at the Theatre de Lys were not New York's first introduction to Brecht, however. A Broadway production of *Threepenny Opera* appeared in 1933, and closed after a dismal 12 performances. Two years later in 1935, in the hey-day of American political theatre, Brecht himself came to New York at the invitation of the Left-wing Theatre Union to mount a production of his play *The Mother* [*Die Mutter*]. The production—and the visit—resulted in utter failure, however, for Brecht made himself *persona non grata* amongst the American company, and the play itself was a failure. Malcolm Goldstein, in his history of American political theatre in the 1930s, describes how the American company resisted Brecht's attempts at *Verfremdung* in both mise-en-scene and dramatic structure. The lighting was naturalistic and the musicians were kept out of view. And while in the original version the Mother pragmatically continues her activism after news of her son's death, Theatre Union playwright Paul Peters wrote his own adaptation: the Mother "receives the news in the play's penultimate scene and is flattened by it, rising from her sickbed in time to take part in the final demonstration."³³³ Despite the attempts to sentimentalize the political plot, the show still closed after only 36 performances, the shortest run of a Theatre Union production.³³⁴ Moreover, the financial failure of the production was a severe setback to the Union.³³⁵

James Lyon, in his history of Brecht's interactions with American theatre, mentions a 1937 interview with Brecht in a German-language New York periodical, and quotes him as saying he saw "no possibility for performance of his plays, which,

³³² Ibid., 9.

³³³ Goldstein, *The Political Stage*, 221.

³³⁴ Ibid., 222.

³³⁵ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, 10.

with all their revolutionary innovations, arose in the soil of a tradition that simply does not exist [here].”³³⁶ Nevertheless, while in exile in the U.S. (from 1941 until 1947), Brecht continually attempted to see his work produced in the country. Lyon traces these projects, such as aborted attempts to get *Schweik in the Second World War* or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* produced on Broadway, and the small successes, such as a special German-language selection of scenes from *The Private Life of the Master Race* in 1942 and a German-language “Brecht evening” at the New School for Social Research in 1943. However, all attempts to get his work produced in English for an American audience resulted in disaster, including short, panned showings of *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Private Life of the Master Race*.³³⁷ Brecht’s base in Los Angeles during World War II resulted in his collaboration with Charles Laughton on the English version of *The Life of Galileo*, and the Brecht-Laughton production was performed first in Hollywood on July 1947, a limited run of 17 performances, with mixed reviews. The production was shipped to New York for a Broadway transfer, opening on December 7, 1947...and played for a total of six performances.

The off-Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera* studied in the previous chapter was thus the first truly visible exposure of Brecht’s work in New York. The sudden boom in Brecht’s popularity in the early 1960s continued off-Broadway, with a production of Brecht’s early play *In the Jungle of Cities* by the experimental company the Living Theatre, run by Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Malina’s directorial training under Erwin Piscator made it perhaps the most appropriate venue for Brechtian productions in New York, and in fact, Julian Beck wrote to Bertha Case, the American representative for the Brecht estate, on January 10, 1960, lobbying for the rights to a Brecht play, preferably *The Caucasian Chalk*

³³⁶ Ibid., 99.

³³⁷ Ibid., 99-150.

Circle: “I speak in this bold fashion because I am eager to impress you with the idea that The Living Theatre is perhaps the best thing that could happen to the work of Brecht in this country.”³³⁸ The production was well received fairly well amongst the Living Theatre supporters, although considering the Living Theatre’s self-proclaimed nature as an anarchist, anti-Establishment company, its production of Brecht cannot really be considered a “mainstreaming” project. More interesting—and publicized—was the dual between two different versions of *Mann ist Mann* that followed in 1962, which, in combination with revue *Brecht on Brecht*, led to purported “Brecht-mania” in New York.

Both Eric Bentley (through the New Repertory Theatre Company, directed by John Hancock) and the Living Theatre arranged simultaneous, rival productions of the play, as *A Man’s a Man* and *Man is Man*, respectively. Bentley used his own adaptation of the early 1926 and the 1931 versions of the play, an adaptation which included three jazz-playing daughters of Widow Begbick and omitted the final scenes 10 and 11. The Living Theatre production, on the other hand, used the translation by Gerhard Nellhaus, which was based on Brecht’s final 1954 version published by Suhrkamp Verlag, as outlined in the preceding chapter.

The general critical reaction to both productions was mixed. Walter Kerr of the *Herald Tribune* strongly disliked the Living Theatre production,³³⁹ and although he approved of the Bentley/Hancock production at the Masque, he found the play itself “over-blown, repetitious, a single-track machine moving horizontally in space.”³⁴⁰ Howard Taubman of the *New York Times*, on the other hand, felt that the

³³⁸ Julian Beck to Bertha Case, Letter dated January 10, 1960 (The Living Theatre Records, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library).

³³⁹ Kerr, “Off Broadway Report: ‘Man Is Man’” (review), *New York Herald Tribune*, September 19, 1962.

³⁴⁰ Kerr, “Off Broadway Report: ‘A Man’s a Man’” (review), *New York Herald Tribune*, September 20, 1962.

play “often pursues broad farcical strains, like the slapstick of the silent films.”³⁴¹ Taubman admitted that the Living Theatre production was “not yet the tightly knit affair it should become,”³⁴² applauding the Bentley/John Hancock version as “tighter in construction and more focused in dramatic drive.”³⁴³ Unfortunately, this “leaner and sharper,” earlier version of the play only revealed a partial lesson: Taubman’s summary of the play is that it shows the “mordant account of a man’s being driven into a career of fighting and killing against his will.” A simpler tale about brainwashing a naïf obviates the more complex, disturbing revelation of the final version as analyzed in the previous chapter: the clown who is easily assimilated into new, violent duties is like a freight train once he gets going. In a grimly amusing example of the New York theatre apparatus inevitably operating as a commodity-machine, the advertisements for both productions touted each as the superior product: the poster for *A Man’s a Man* included the quotes “Infinitely Superior” and “The Better of the two”; while *Man Is Man* likewise claimed to be “Superior!”

As mentioned above, London audiences had direct exposure to Brecht’s own productions with the 1956 visit from the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht’s oft-quoted advice to his company before the trip pointed out that “there is in England a long-standing fear that German art...must be terribly heavy, slow, laborious and pedestrian. So our playing needs to be quick, light, strong...We must keep the tempo of a run-through and infect it with quiet strength, with our own fun.”³⁴⁴ The Ensemble brought three productions: *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; its *Mother Courage* with Helene Weigel; and a new production, the play *Trumpets and Drums* (originally *Pauken und Trompeten*), Brecht’s 1955 adaptation of George Farquhar’s 1706 hit *The Recruiting*

³⁴¹ Taubman, “Theater: Man Is Man” (review), *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1962.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Taubman, “Theater: A Man’s a Man,” (review). *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1962.

³⁴⁴ Brecht, “Our London Season,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 283.

Officer. Despite Kenneth Tynan's expected ecstatic response, the English critics were ambivalent about the fully-realized *Verfremdung* of the Berliner Ensemble (an estrangement doubled by the presentation of the plays in German). Harold Hobson, the critic in the *Sunday Times*, was complimentary of the acting, which he found "of a very high standard, [and] the scenery often enchanting. There are performances of deep originality and lofty ambition. [But] I am bound in honesty to add that, except for parts of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, they bored and annoyed me."³⁴⁵

The lukewarm reception to Brecht's dramas continued with the English Stage Company's production of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, starring Peggy Ashcroft, one month after the Ensemble's visit. Ashcroft and director George Devine had visited Berlin before the production to see the Ensemble in action, and their measures to create an authentically Brecht production included securing Brecht designer Teo Otto; Paul Dessau the composer; and inviting Helene Weigel to attend rehearsals and discuss acting with Ashcroft.³⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the production suffered from a misapplication of strict technique. Brecht had advised his own Ensemble actors to keep their own work light and fun; the English actors, in turn, adapted their own talents to the Brechtian canon by turning "heavy, slow, laborious and pedestrian." In order to achieve a "cool" form of acting, Devine suggested that actors limited their general vocal range,³⁴⁷ an example of how the highly-trained English actor was encouraged to treat *Verfremdung* as a form of mechanization rather than one of live, engaged communication. John Elsom has described the British interpretation of Brechtian technique as "a sort of Marxist puritan revolution...[and] this emphasis upon austerity ignores Brecht's blood-and-thunder imagery."³⁴⁸ The show fell flat with the

³⁴⁵ Hobson, "A Doubt About Brecht," in *Bertolt Brecht in Britain*, eds. Jacobs and Ohlsen, 81.

³⁴⁶ Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 52.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁴⁸ Elsom, *Post-war British theatre*, 119.

critics and audiences were small, and Royal Court artistic director Devine never mounted another Brecht play.³⁴⁹ Productions of Brecht's works were rare in London thereafter, although pursued at the Citizen Theatre in Glasgow, a left-wing political company, and the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, one of the first Theatre-In-Education companies in Britain.

Brecht in the 60s: *Mother Courage*, a case study

Considering the discrepancies between the artistic and commercial exigencies of New York's theatre industry and Brecht's theatre project, it is ironic that Brecht was particularly intent upon seeing his work succeed on Broadway.³⁵⁰ Lyon, tracing the prolific correspondence between Brecht and his American contacts, concludes that "Brecht wanted a professional show on Broadway or nothing."³⁵¹ It was not until 1963, in the wake of the "Brecht boom," that the first Broadway production of a Brecht play occurred (excepting the 6 performances of the Charles Laughton *Galileo* in 1947): *Mother Courage and Her Children* directed by Jerome Robbins and starring Anne Bancroft, opened at the Martin Beck Theatre (now the Al Hirschfield Theatre) on March 28, 1963. Producer Cheryl Crawford had become the producer of the hugely successful *Brecht on Brecht*, arranged a national tour in 1963, and also attempted to get foreign productions off the ground. Crawford had first approached director/choreographer Jerome Robbins with the play in August of 1961, and after a year of considering the project and juggling other commitments, Robbins came on board with Crawford in the fall of 1962 with the plan for a spring 1963 opening. Stefan Brecht, Bertolt's son, was most supportive in Crawford's desires to launch a commercial Brechtian production. "I am most anxious for a good Broadway

³⁴⁹Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 55.

³⁵⁰This desire might be seen as part of what Bathrick calls Brecht's "love-hate struggle" of coming to terms with capitalist America ("Brecht's Marxism and America," 209).

³⁵¹Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, 140.

production of a play of his,” Stefan wrote Crawford in a February 19, 1962 letter; “I also hope that our Mother Courage project is only the first in a series!”³⁵² The production, a financial failure that received ambivalent reviews, is the highest-profile example of the inexorable problem of transferring a Brechtian text to the above-outlined historical context of New York and London theatre. Neither Brecht’s politics nor the comic and critical potential were fully realized, due to an overly anxious attempt to mimic the work of the Berliner Ensemble. Moreover, the complex political critique of the play, achieved via a comic dialectic, was in the end drowned out by the psychologically-based liberal humanism that framed the mainstream horizon of expectations, as described above.

Mother Courage is, in Eric Bentley’s summary, “essentially courageous...and essentially cowardly.”³⁵³ Brecht offered a more complex explication of the dialectical procedure behind the paradox and ironies of Mother Courage’s concrete existence in a short essay, “*Mother Courage* portrayed in two manners.”³⁵⁴ This essay, part of the “Dialectics in the Theatre” project written in the last years of Brecht’s life, begins with a clarification of the “common” interpretation of the character, which brings to the spectator a “pleasure of a peculiar sort: a triumph, that of the indestructibility of a strong, vital person, struck down by the exigencies of war.”³⁵⁵ The other, concurrent representation of Mother Courage, however (that performed by Helene Weigel), is to show that war is the best time for merchants and reveal the paradox of a maternal merchant in a time of war.

³⁵² Stefan Brecht to Cheryl Crawford, Letter dated February 19, 1960 (Cheryl Crawford Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library).

³⁵³ Bentley, “Who is Mother Courage?” in Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, ed. Bentley, 9-10.

³⁵⁴ Brecht, „<<Mutter Courage ,>> in zweifacher Art dargestellt,“ in *Schriften zum Theater II*, 895-896.

³⁵⁵ Brecht, „<<Mutter Courage ,>> in zweifacher Art dargestellt,“ 895. („kommt der Zuschauer..in den Genuß eines eigentümlichen Genusses: eines Triumphs über die Unzerstörbarkeit einer lebenskräftigen, durch die Unbilden des Krieges heimgesuchten Person.“)

The career is a self-evident one, but also a soiled one, from which Mother Courage drinks her death. The merchant-mother is a great, living contradiction, and it is this that destroys and deforms her, to the point of unrecognizability...The tragedy of Mother Courage and her life, so profoundly sensed by the audience, comes out of this terrible contradiction, one which destroyed a person; a contradiction that can be solved, but only by society itself and only after a long, terrible struggle. And the moral superiority of this representation is that this person is indeed shown as destructible—even the most vital of human beings! ³⁵⁶

By emphasizing the equal negativity of Courage's strength and weakness, the second (preferred) portrayal foregrounds the social-historic-economic context in which mankind (no matter its personal and moral qualities) is, inevitably, destroyed. And it is through a sense of the comic and the darkly absurd (rather than the tragic) that the irony of this double negativity can be made clear.

The play begins with a sardonic discussion between a sergeant and a recruiting officer for the Oxenstierna's Swedish (Protestant) forces in Poland in 1624. The military men bemoan the laziness and comfort to which the locals have become accustomed, and extol the organizing and motivational qualities of war.³⁵⁷ "You know," the Sergeant declares, "they've been too long around here without a good war...Peace makes ya sloppy, and war puts things in order" (9). Complaining about the lackadaisical idyll of peaceful villages, he explains the social order that comes about from war—census-taking, legal names, organized production, goods and transportation. With Mother Courage's entrance (along with her three children and the wagon, her mobile market) we see the civilian counterpart to this social pragmatism.

³⁵⁶ Ibid. („Der Handel war auch hier eine selbstverständliche Erwerbsquelle, aber doch eine verschmutzte, aus der die Courage Tod trank. Die Händlerin-Mutter wurde ein großer lebender Widerspruch, und er war es, der sie verunstaltete und deformierte, bis zur Unkenntlichkeit...Die dem Publikum tief fühlbare Tragik der Courage und ihres Lebens bestand darin, daß heir ein entsetzlicher Widerspruch bestand, der einen Menschen vernichtete, ein Widerspruch, der gelöst werden konnte, aber nur von der Gesellschaft selbst und in langen, schrecklichen Kämpfen. Und die sittliche Überlegenheit dieser Art der Darstellung bestand darin, daß der Mensch als zerstörbar gezeichnet wurde, selbst der lebenskräftigste!“)

³⁵⁷ Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. All in-text page numbers are from this publication, with my translations.

Although patently mocking the military mentality of duty, honor, and discipline, Courage's outlook on life is dependent upon the organizational benefits of a military society. The suspicious army men and Mother Courage, an independent contractor, are (regulatory tensions aside) working in tandem and mutually dependent. Mother Courage scolds the recruiting officer, knowing he could get five guilders for snagging her son for the battlefield. Nevertheless, the recruiting officer seals the deal while Courage haggles over her own deal, selling a belt to the sergeant. Typically, Brecht establishes the lesson of the entire play in the first scene. The economic basis that keeps the war-machine running is laid out, and all of the players' roles are clearly defined. The death of all three children is foretold and Courage's stubborn adherence to her war-centered trade is assured. When the sergeant points out to her that she admits to living off of war, and asks how there can be war without soldiers, Courage's cunning answer is "They don't have to be mine" (15). Nevertheless, despite her cleverness and pragmatism, Mother Courage's is a losing proposition, and conclusion of the first scene parallels the final conclusion. Nothing has changed, and Mother Courage has not learned anything, as Brecht indicated.³⁵⁸

The first scene is in fact as broad and ridiculous as a vaudeville sketch, and the play's structure is often reminiscent of a music-hall comedy. The two officers' aforementioned back-and-forth sets the tone at a ridiculous level, and Courage has a piece of shtick about her children's names. Add to this nonsense the odd song Mother Courage sings upon her entrance, and the play begins as a very dark sketch comedy. This was, in fact, Brecht's advice. According to Eric Bentley's Brecht memoir, Brecht's recommendation to an American visitor interested in producing the play was "Tell them to play the comedy—the tragic elements, the ideas, all that will take care of

³⁵⁸ Brecht, "Die Courage lernt nichts," in *Schriften zum Theater III*, 1150.

itself.”³⁵⁹ The playfulness of epic story-telling is in evidence throughout the first few scenes, and even near the end of the play, as the gruesomeness mounts, there are bits of the ridiculous thrown in. The silliness of human folly plays out once more in scene 8 in the squabble between Mother Courage’s two improbable suitors, the Chaplain and the Cook. Even more ridiculous is the appearance of a fat, overly made-up Yvette (the former camp prostitute and now a colonel’s widow), who waddles in with a stick and finally meets back up with her first seducer: the bedraggled, worse-for-the-wear Cook. The conversation between the two relics is amusing and pathetic, and Mother Courage is an appreciative audience: “Peter Piper! Who drove all the women crazy!” she laughs as Yvette rails into him. The sheepish Cook protests that “[that] was a long time ago. It’s not true any more,” only to be scolded: “Stand up when a lady is speaking to you!” (81). The comic scene plays in tandem with the revelation that Eilif will be executed for unlawful actions in time of peace.

The comic texture of the play relies upon a juxtaposition of calculated gestus and gleeful randomness. Helene Weigel developed a defining Mother Courage gestus of “audibly snapping shut the leather money-bag slung from her neck,”³⁶⁰ established in the very first scene, along with the action of strapping on the wagon harnesses: the play’s greatest act of capitulation. The second scene reveals a more random sense of play, with Eilif’s set-piece “song-and-dance act.”³⁶¹ Singing “The Song of the Wise Woman and the Soldier” for his commanding officer, the successful soldier performs a sword dance as part of the entertainment. According to Eric Bentley, Brecht was once asked by a young student at a Communist Youth meeting in East Berlin why a character would perform an odd sword dance in the play. Mulling it over with his cigar, Brecht replied: “There are two answers to that. One is: people do perform such

³⁵⁹ Bentley, *Bentley on Brecht*, 365.

³⁶⁰ Thomson, *Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children*, 27.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

dances. The other is: why not?”³⁶² Moment of farce and of the ridiculous sparkle in the epic theatre as gleeful reminders of the comic “why not?” This perverse combination of dialectical critique and spontaneous laughter is a particularly difficult attribute of Brecht’s dramaturgy.

Peter Thomson, in a comprehensive study of *Mother Courage*, points out that even the most sympathetic character, the mute daughter Katrin, participates in the farce, such as the broad comedy chase between Katrin and her mother in scene 5. “It is an effort to remember that the disputed property is an endangered baby and the obstacle around which the players maneuver is a mutilated peasant.”³⁶³ Another Looney-Toons moment occurs in the penultimate scene, leading up to the climax of Katrin’s death. The soldiers, distressed that the noise of Katrin’s drumming from the farmers’ roof will warn the townspeople below of the impending attack, decide upon a solution:

Lieutenant: We have to make a noise with something louder than her drum. What can we make a noise with?

First Soldier: We aren’t allowed to make any noise.

Lieutenant: A harmless noise, you idiot. One that isn’t war-related. (99)

The bitter punchline is that the threatened farmer himself offers to drown Katrin out by chopping wood, insuring his farm’s safety at the expense of his fellow townspeople. The comedy bitterly emphasizes the endemic, survivalist myopia engendered by war.

Brecht made an interesting observation in 1954 on the difference between the audience of 1949 and the current audience. “The spectators in 1949 and the following years did not see Courage’s crimes, her collaboration, her desire to profit from a

³⁶² Bentley, “What is a Zonk?”, in *Bentley on Brecht*, 119.

³⁶³ Thomson, *Brecht: Mother Courage*, 44.

society of war; they saw only her failures, her sorrows.”³⁶⁴ Brecht comments on the irony of the audience whose journey mirrored that of Mother Courage. The audience reeling from “the Hitler-war, in which they had collaborated,” was unable to engage dialectically with the play. “War would bring them not only sorrows, but also the inability to learn from it.”³⁶⁵ The challenge now (in 1954) is to make the play work in the context of a new imminent war. The playwright writes a very sharp reminder of the economic and social conditions that again mirror the world of Mother Courage, and wonders whether the play might sink in this time, in the dawn of a new, “cold” war:

The play is no longer a play that has come too late, that is to say, *after* a war. Horrifyingly, a new war looms. No one speaks about it, but everyone knows about it. The vast majority is not for war. But there are so many toils. Could they not be eliminated by another war? Didn’t people do quite well in the last one, at any rate up until the shortage at the end? Are there not such things as lucky wars?

I would very much like to know how much the spectator of *Mother Courage and her Children* today understands the warning of the play.³⁶⁶

Unfortunately, the historical context of the American theatre in the Cold War was not conducive to comic, political contradictions, despite Eisenhower’s 1961 farewell speech warning us of the dangers of the military-industrial complex.

Producer Crawford came out of the long-standing tradition of psychologically-motivated Method acting. She was a founder of the Group Theatre in the 1930s, and although the Group’s mission was to promulgate left-wing political theatre, the

³⁶⁴ Brecht, „Das Unglück allein ist ein schlechter Lehrer,“ in *Schriften zum Theater III*, 1148. [„Die Zuschauer des Jahres 1949 und der folgenden Jahre sahen nicht die Verbrechen der Courage, ihr Mitmachen, ihr Am-Kriegsgeschäft-mitverdienen-Wollen; sie sahen nur ihren Mißerfolg, ihre Leiden.“]

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 1148. [„Der Krieg würde ihnen nicht nur Leiden bringen, sondern auch die Unfähigkeit, daraus zu lernen.“]

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 1149. [„Das Stück ist heute kein Stück mehr, dass zu spät gekommen ist, nämlich nach einem Krieg. Schrecklicherweise droht ein neuer Krieg. Niemand spricht davon, jeder weiß davon. Die große Menge ist nicht für Krieg. Aber es gibt so viele Mühsale. Könnten sie nicht durch einen Krieg beseitigt werden? Hat man nicht doch ganz gut verdient im letzten, jedenfalls bis knapp vor dem Ende? Gibt es nicht doch auch glückliche Krieg? {¶} Ich möchte gern wissen, wie viele der Zuschauer von <Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder> die Warnung des Stücks heute verstehen.“]

company was technically guided by the Method-practitioners Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Elia Kazan. The Group Theatre artists, including Crawford, re-formed into the Actor's Studio after World War II. Crawford's autobiography reveals her Stanislavskian approach to *Mother Courage*:

...in the script [the characters] are like line drawings that need to be fleshed out. Days could well be spent exploring the characters' behavior as they tramped the desolate war-torn countries. How did they find food, if any? Clothing? Where did they sleep? Was there any energy left for sex, any desire to stay clean, any feelings of comradeship or every-man-for-himself, any awareness of their degradation?³⁶⁷

Her analysis privileges the individual objectives and psychology within the narrative, rather than the framework of socio-political forces that the play interrogates through the characters' choices and contradictions.

In contrast with Crawford, Robbins (who had, incidentally, trained with Robert Lewis at the Actor's Studio when it first opened, as part of his training to move from choreography to directing)³⁶⁸ appears to have had a keener eye for the particular needs of the epic theatre, namely that the actors need to direct their energies to Brecht's point of view, a skill that is "extremely hard for American actors to achieve, because it really has to be a joint effort to produce, project, a particular author's point of view and not to schmaltz it up with a lot of personal stories."³⁶⁹ Robbins sensed the Brechtian relationship between the actor and the text, namely that the performance of each role is part of the larger *Fabel*, rather than a self-contained psychological construct. Analyzing the play, Robbins decided that it

really isn't an anti-war play, it's an anti-business-as-usual play and it's tremendously an anti-capitalist play...the play concerns the recognition of involvement and commitment and responsibility, and the people in the play

³⁶⁷ Crawford, *One Naked Individual*, 262

³⁶⁸ Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins*, 134-135.

³⁶⁹ Jerome Robbins, "Jerome Robbins' notes on *Mother Courage* and her children," Sound recording made November 29, 1962. (Jerome Robbins Collection. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Performing Art Library, New York Public Library).

seem to be unaware of their involvement, of their commitments and of their responsibilities to each other. If anyone's going to get crushed, it can't be you; it has to be the person next to you.³⁷⁰

This dialectical mechanism, wherein the spectator realizes his or her own involvement through the lack of awareness among the characters, needs to be triggered and encouraged by the comic texture and the peculiar musical interludes. Unfortunately, like George Devine at the RSC, Robbins's approach was to interpret "didactic" as dry and grim.

A study of the production script (a custom-edited version of Eric Bentley's translation)³⁷¹ indicates that a lot of the ridiculous comedy was removed from the play, perhaps stemming from Robbins' overly earnest desire to create a "didactic" Brechtian style. Recounting an early conversation with Geraldine Page, Robbins recalls that the prospective Mother Courage said "you're out-Brecht Brecht, you're out-alienating Brecht, and I [Robbins] suddenly realized that she saw what I was about."³⁷² The *TIME* magazine reviewer felt that Robbins's direction was "straining" and that it achieved an inappropriate sense of "laconic toughness." For the *Village Voice*, Michael Smith wrote that the show "is much too heavy. Everything is insistently deliberate and implacable... There is almost never a moment when they [the actors] just act, just play the play, just do what they are doing."³⁷³ Gordon Rogoff wrote a critique of the Broadway production in the Fall 1963 issue of *TDR*, in which he laments that *Mother Courage* on Broadway "settles for Jerome Robbins's half-world, neither all Broadway nor all Berlin, not *alienated* so much as *semi-detached*, a

³⁷⁰ Robbins, "Jerome Robbins' notes on Mother Courage and her children," Sound recording made November 27, 1962. (Jerome Robbins Collection).

³⁷¹ Production script for *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Lincoln Center 1963. Type-written script with corrections, dated 2/4/63. Producer: Cheryl Crawford. Director: Jerome Robbins. Adaptor: Eric Bentley. Stage Manager: Porter Van Zandt. (Porter Van Zandt Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Performing Art Library, New York Public Library).

³⁷² Jerome Robbins, "Jerome Robbins' notes on Mother Courage and her children," Sound recording made November 26, 1962. (Jerome Robbins Collection).

³⁷³ Smith, "Theatre Uptown: Courage, Brothers" (review), *Village Voice* April 4, 1963.

world in which Brecht's apparently simple means are mistaken for simplicity."³⁷⁴ The reviewers interestingly point out Barbara Harris' portrayal of Yvette as the sole source of absurd comedy in the play: this was a complimentary note from the *Village Voice* reviewer, whereas *TIME* magazine didn't feel it was appropriate.

The editing of the script in rehearsal removed much of the distancing humor of the other characters, beginning with the first scene. Moreover, the American actors proved unable to play comedy in the estranging, presentational fashion that makes the political irony of the play clear. Bancroft certainly did not grasp the calculated steps Mother Courage must follow, and her comic interpretation was read as a "folksy Bronx matriarch."³⁷⁵ Even Crawford became worried that Bancroft was "playing a lot of the part like a Jewish mama."³⁷⁶ Judging from rehearsal notes and reviews, Bancroft's interpretation of Mother Courage was closer to *Fiddler on the Roof's* Golde than to Helene Weigel. Unable to elicit Mother Courage the Hyena (as the Chaplain describes her in scene 8), Bancroft represented Mother Courage in the first manner described by Brecht, the easy way out, giving the audience the pleasure of seeing the triumph of an indestructible, vital, maternal force. Reviewers certainly did not perceive a soiled, deformed colluder, the walking contradiction that Brecht intended. Properly executed, the final moment, when Mother Courage—having paid the farmers for her daughter's burial—straps back on her wagon and runs after the troops to "get back into business," ought to horrify with its dark irony. *TIME* magazine however, praised the production for "revealing the tenacious, indomitable life force in human beings that survives history"³⁷⁷ In short, one might infer that the casting of a recent Oscar-winning (for *The Miracle Worker*) movie star to play a "*großer lebender*

³⁷⁴ Rogoff, "The Juggernaut of Production," *The Tulane Drama Review* (Autumn 1963), 148.

³⁷⁵ *TIME*, "Intellectual Firestorm" (review).

³⁷⁶ Cheryl Crawford to Jerome Robbins. Rehearsal notes. Letter dated March 11, 1963. (Cheryl Crawford Papers).

³⁷⁷ *TIME*, "Intellectual Firestorm" (review).

Widerspruch” was counter-intuitive: the inevitable desire of the Hollywood actor to be liked, to be understood, canceled out the uncomfortable deformity of Brecht’s great contradiction. In notes written for her 1963 *Partisan Review* theatre essays, Susan Sontag jotted down *Mother Courage* as an example of the “worst thing wrong with Broadway theatre”: “what was wrong with Mother Courage was an amateur style (not that these people can’t act—but their idea of the stage, or B’way, prevents them from acting).”³⁷⁸

Rogoff’s *TDR* article “The Juggernaut of Production” argues that in America, Brecht’s Marxism “tend[s] to get lost in the distorting mirror of the cold war...”³⁷⁹ Just as the dialectical treatment of society and politics escaped the American (and British) theatre practitioners, the comedy of the piece was lost, since it is a “comedy that bases its drama on interior argument, the clash of opposites, the tension that exists between two seemingly irreconcilable ideas.”³⁸⁰ Rogoff considers the national acting style, and comments on Bancroft’s typically American approach to the character: “sentimentally and tragically, in the great tradition of every theatre *but Brecht’s*, she learns from the experience of her losses, though, of course, like her wagon on the immovable stage, she has no place to go.”³⁸¹

Jerome Robbins’s recorded account of the production journey is full of bitterness regarding the business of the New York stage. For instance, Crawford apparently played around behind his back regarding casting, pressuring him to accept Actor’s Studio-trained Bancroft. A deeply disappointed Robbins, writing to *TDR* in response to Rogoff’s article, explains the technical impossibility of his intent,

³⁷⁸ Susan Sontag, Handwritten notes for “Theatre Chronicle” articles. 1963. (Susan Sontag Papers).

³⁷⁹ Rogoff, “Juggernaut of Production,” 142.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 149. Emphasis added.

explaining the “practicalities and business of theatre.”³⁸² Robbins’s biggest lament is the impossibility of time, for “TIME (WHICH EQUALS MONEY)” is necessary for a Brechtian rehearsal process, and the financial costs of Broadway rehearsals make time a scarce commodity. Indeed, Robbins realizes that “[o]ne of the most remarkable and enlightening and frightening experiences of the *Mother Courage* production was to view with mounting horror the exact parallel of show business as is practiced on Broadway in the production of a show and the parallel course of war business as is projected in *Mother Courage*.”³⁸³ The lighting depends upon the financial resources for stagehands; the union rules affect the use of music and musicians; and the commercial (free-lance) actors are necessarily preoccupied with billing, notices, and reputation. In an odder attempt at explanation, Eric Bentley (looking back on the production in 1997) blamed Paul Dessau’s music for the production’s lack of success, arguing that “it just wasn’t very theatrical music.”³⁸⁴ The Broadway production was full of mismatched sensibilities, reflected by the frustrations recorded by producer, director, adaptor, and Brechtian representatives. Nevertheless, Bentley pointed out that the show “ran for six weeks in a very large theatre, so it was a financial flop but a lot of people saw it.”³⁸⁵ All told though, the experience was a rough one for all involved.

Conclusion: *Mother Courage* and the Theatre Industry

As the historical outline above has shown, Brecht’s incorporation into the mainstream theatres was seen as part of the resurrection of an avant-garde in Anglo-

³⁸² Jerome Robbins, “Letter to Tulane Drama Review,” Sound recording of dictated letter to the editors of *The Tulane Review* (1963, no date specified). The letter did not appear in *TDR*.. (Jerome Robbins Collection).

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Bentley, “*Brecht*”: Eric Bentley. *Theatre Talk*, episode #211, taped March 10, 1997. (Theatre on Film and Tape Collection, Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library. Viewed on March 10, 2006).

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

American culture beginning in the mid 1950s and growing in visibility as the new decade began. Tynan, in his review of the Berliner Ensemble's first visit, gives us a wonderful British example of the connection between Brecht and a knowing attitude towards the "avant-garde" that circulated amongst the average mainstream theatre-goer as early as 1956. "It is possible to enter the Palace Theatre wearing the familiar British smile of so-unsophisticated-my-dear-and-after-all-we've-rather-*had*-Expressionism (what *do* such people think Expressionism was?) and it is possible to leave with the same faint smile intact. It is possible: but not pleasant to contemplate."³⁸⁶ The general horizon of expectations was prepared for a new theatricality, one that would challenge the dramaturgical and visual dominance of realism. However, a dialectical political critique was harder to effect through mainstream theatrical productions. Stephen Lacey's and Margaret Eddershaw's histories describe how the work of Brecht became thoroughly ensconced in the high-profile London theatres at the same time, through the influence of directors such as George Devine, William Gaskill, Peter Hall and Peter Brook, who paid close attention to the work of the Berliner Ensemble and Brecht's theories as they were available, but whose productions of Brecht's works were by and large unsuccessful.³⁸⁷ Dramatic representations of specific social and psychological crises (unemployment; unintended pregnancy; divorce), although increasingly Brechtian in form, encouraged a discourse of emotional resolution, a tendency of the "containment liberalism" that sought solutions to dichotomous problems. Looking back in 1978 on the impact of Brecht's legacy on the work of Edward Bond in particular, Peter Holland begins by asserting

³⁸⁶ Tynan, *Curtains*, 454.

³⁸⁷ A 1962 RSC production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, directed by William Gaskill was the only London production of a Brecht play that was critically successful. In fact, RSC artistic director Peter Hall took over the production during the dress-rehearsals and shaved it down to (only!) three and a half hours (Eddershaw, 60). Gaskill's central role in successfully incorporating Brecht's theories into British theatre production is discussed in chapter 4.

that it was “to a large extent through a refusal to accept the fundamentally political basis of Brecht’s theatre practice that critics have created the illusory split of Brecht into a good playwright and a bad politician.”³⁸⁸ With regards to Brecht’s own dramas, Brecht’s use of dialectics—and comedy—to expose the socio-economic contradictions in human actions throughout history was approached as a general humanist message of human survival and the need for compassion.³⁸⁹

Harold Hobson’s reaction to the Berliner Ensemble’s first visit reveals the peculiar perversity behind the resistance to the political critique inherent in Brecht’s work. Hobson writes a very keen analysis of the Ensemble’s *Mother Courage*, noting that in the West the audience would be invited to identify with Mother Courage “and triumph in her unbeatable pugnacity,” whereas Brecht’s own production “is lit by no gleam of spiritual victory...we are intended rather to realize that in war human nature corrodes and putrefies.”³⁹⁰ However, he concludes his review with an unconscious example of the instinctive expectation for a resolution, encouraged by the social realism of mid-century American and English drama: “fundamentally, there is not any more rational illumination in *Mother Courage* or the other plays of Brecht than there is in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”³⁹¹ Despite his admiration of the aesthetic beauty and the high quality of the acting, and despite his sharp perception of the critical ironies of the works, Hobson—the theatre critic for the preeminent Sunday *Times*—could see no rationale to having such an evening in the theatre.

In New York, likewise, practitioners could not sustain a theatre that provokes without providing a clear resolution. In his review of the Crawford production for the

³⁸⁸ Holland, “Brecht, Bond, Gaskill, and the Practice of Political Theatre,” *Theatre Quarterly* (Summer 1978), 24.

³⁸⁹ David Bathrick calls this critical containment, beginning with Eric Bentley’s essays in the 1940s, “attempts to make Brecht fit for society” (“Brecht’s Marxism and America,” 218).

³⁹⁰ Hobson, in *Bertolt Brecht in Britain*, eds. Jacobs and Ohlsen, 80.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

London *Observer*, Kenneth Tynan wrote, regarding the Broadway audience, that what “they most enjoy—empathy, violence, loud colours, and safe liberal exhortation—is precisely what Brecht spent the greater part of his life detesting. There is no room on Broadway for playwrights as simple and sceptical as this.”³⁹² The direct application of Brecht to Broadway didn’t work; the tendency towards containment, that perception that aligned politics along psychological certainties and “safe liberal exhortations,” flattened the subtle, historically-specific dialectics. The production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* starring Christopher Plummer later the same year at Lincoln Center suffered from similar unsubtleties.³⁹³ What the Broadway apparatus distilled from *Mother Courage* was an anti-war message and an uplifting picture of human survival, manipulating the specificity of Brecht’s anti-naturalistic comedy. *Mother Courage* will never work as long as people take the name “Courage” at face value. In an ironic twist, the Broadway production of *Mother Courage* operated more along the lines of Brecht’s policy for the *Lehrstücke*: it served as a learning experience for the players only.

Some critics, however, expressed a sense that a new dynamic was needed in the Anglo-American theatre—containment was giving way to confrontation. A 1960 lecture by Bentley, for example, analyzed the general nature of Western cultural discourse in the wake of unresolved political, social and economic tensions, stemming from the failure of World War II to completely solve the crises of the 1930’s and from the new global crisis of atomic fear. “The Pro and Con of Political Theatre,” while, granted, a formally-contained debate, considers the efficacy of popular theatre to contribute to the critical life of the public sphere by carving out a new, popular space

³⁹² Tynan, *Tynan Right and Left*, 137-138.

³⁹³ The Burns Mantle Yearbook’s description of director Tony Richardson’s production, along with “redundant” and “strident”; Howard Taubman in the New York *Times* lamented that it was a caricature and cartoonish rather than horrifying.

for thought-provoking art that does not necessarily provide answers nor an emotional resolution. He indicts the overly-esteemed seriousness of commercial theatre, and, using *Death of a Salesman* as an example, Bentley criticizes American social dramas in which “[m]uch is passed off as sublime that is in fact only earnest.”³⁹⁴ Robert Brustein’s admiration for the “theatre of revolt,” although still bound by categories and rough syntheses of different artistic methodologies, was also a sign of this transition from containment thinking: “Politics demands resolution; dramatic art is content to leave us in ambiguity.”³⁹⁵ Marshall McLuhan’s anthropology of the modern “extensions of man” directly confronts this dissolution of containment and connects it to politics and ethics: “Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree.” McLuhan sees a reflection of this cultural transformation in the Theater of the Absurd, which “dramatizes this recent dilemma of Western man, the man of action who appears not to be involved in the action.”³⁹⁶

The Berliner Ensemble visited London for a second time in 1965, and the five plays exhibited only served to underscore the Anglophonic failure to translate the comedy inherent in the Brechtian sensibility. Penelope Gilliatt, writing for *The Observer*, remarked upon seeing the Ensemble’s work:

This is the way Brecht wanted the theatre to be: skimming, speculative, beautiful, fun. I realise that every received idea about him in England teaches the opposite. His plays are expected to be heavy because he was German, shut-minded because he was a Marxist, visually like wartime utility because of his emphasis on use in design and no fun at all.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁴ Bentley, “The Pro and Con of Political Theatre,” in *Theatre of Commitment*, 145.

³⁹⁵ Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt*, 416.

³⁹⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 5. He also, importantly, expands the analysis to racial and generational relations: “this implosive factor...alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association.”

³⁹⁷ Quoted in Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 64.

Although Anglo-American practitioners were unable to fully realize the powerful blend of Marxist dialectics and comedy in Brecht's own plays, the door was opened for a new, challenging popular theatre that utilized the Brechtian comedy of contradictions—a method of entertainment that causes delayed provocation, thinking after laughter. Susan Sontag, reviewing Abel's *Metatheatre* for the *Partisan Review*, makes a special point of his omission of comedy in his thesis of the inevitability of “metatheatre” in a post-tragic world. As Sontag points out, a metatheatrical approach to the performing arts has been around since the comic theatre of Aristophanes.³⁹⁸ The tragi-comic effect is metatheatrical in that it provides no resolution, neither the nihilism of tragedy nor the optimism of straight comedy. Rather, as Bentley puts it in his lecture on “The Theatre of Commitment,” the tragi-comedy is open at the end, and it says: “what happens after this is up to you, the public.”³⁹⁹ The critical and commercial context was gradually assimilating a comedy of double-negatives, leading the way to a challenging mainstream theatre that mixed postmodern play and Brecht's historical dialectics—a theatre that would be achieved by new works that were conceived and produced within the context of the London theatre and crossed the Atlantic to find success on Broadway.

³⁹⁸ Sontag, “The death of tragedy,” in *Against Interpretation*, 135.

³⁹⁹ Bentley, “The Theatre of Commitment,” in *Theatre of Commitment*, 221.

CHAPTER 4:
BRECHT'S LEGACY:
POLITICAL SATIRE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Introduction

As the previous chapter demonstrated, 1956 was the beginning of a significant change in the London theatre scene due not only to the beginning of “New Wave Realism,” but also due to the Berliner Ensemble’s influence, the acceptance of the “avant-garde,” and the growing importance of Theatre Workshop.⁴⁰⁰ In this chapter I examine two early 1960s productions in London’s West End which subsequently transferred to Broadway theatres: the comedy revue *Beyond the Fringe* and the Theatre Workshop musical *Oh What a Lovely War*. Both are examples of a Brechtian comic dialectic of history incorporated into popular entertainment: the music-hall revue and cabaret comedy sketches. These shows are particular important puzzle-pieces in this history for they succeeded—on both sides of the Atlantic—in evoking a critical reappraisal of both Cold War nationalism and the reactionary use of history.

The relationship between the English and American professional theatres goes back way before the establishment of “Broadway” as a theatre district (and idea) itself. In a comprehensive history of Broadway, Andrew Harris references American producer Stephen King’s invitation of George Frederick Cooke in 1810 as the first cross-Atlantic imported tour.⁴⁰¹ Star imports and production exchanges have become regular practice over the past 200 years, and the relationship between the commercial districts of the West End and Broadway is particularly close.

⁴⁰⁰ Yael Zarhy-Levo’s article “Joan Littlewood and her Peculiar (Hi)story As Others Tell It” (*Theatre Survey* 42.2) offers a comprehensive analysis of how the complicated critical reception of Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop has subsequently caused complications in post-war British theatre historiography.

⁴⁰¹ Harris, *Broadway Theatre*, 4.

The vital connection between London and New York was heralded at the end of the fifties by the preeminent British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, who, writing the “Decade in Retrospect: 1959” for the London *Observer*, asserted that “the strongest and most unmistakable influence on our drama in the last ten years has been transatlantic. For the first time in its history, the English theatre has been swayed and shaped by America...If latter-day English drama is serious in intent, contemporary in theme, and written in rasping prose, Broadway and Hollywood are part of the reason.”⁴⁰² This assessment of the cross-Atlantic influence leading up to the early 1960’s is echoed in Richard Eyre’s more recent history of British theatre:

In the 1940s and ‘50s Britain borrowed from American theatre—musicals and plays—energy, a voracious appetite for passionate language used with unembarrassed enthusiasm, and an ambition to make theatre worth bothering about. For all the commercialism of Broadway, the British theatre gained something that seemed to have been lost: the New World gave life to the Old.⁴⁰³

By 1962-63 the commercial winds were changing on both sides of the Atlantic, and, as most theatre histories have emphasized, the predominant force for innovation was coming from the American experimental art theatre (the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, etc.). The political force of experimental theatre did of course impact mainstream productions in interesting ways, again in both countries. Eyre describes the post-1956 relationship thus: “new playwrights, actors, and directors were emerging, with a cocky self-confidence. But the American theatre continued to provide the body of British theatre—if not with the life-giving jolt—then at least with a stimulating transfusion.”⁴⁰⁴ The transfer of a British production to Broadway, then, can be seen as a cross-transfusion. There were particular advantages and disadvantages inherent in each country’s mainstream theatre (e.g., the financial

⁴⁰² Tynan, “Decade in Retrospect: 1959,” in *Tynan Right and Left*, 14.

⁴⁰³ Eyre and Wright, *Changing Stages*, 13.

⁴⁰⁴ Eyre, *Changing Stages*, 190.

impediment to permanent companies on Broadway, and the continued censorship of British theatre). The ability to exchange productions led to the most fruitful moments of transgression in the commercial theatre in London and New York in the early 1960's.

The transfer of both *Beyond the Fringe* and *Oh What a Lovely War* from non-commercial English productions to West End and Broadway theatres furthered the transformation of the mainstream spectatorial vocabulary. This chapter argues that these productions were seminal instances of popular Anglo-American productions effecting a truly Brechtian political theatre, and at the same time achieving a highly visible success that remained elusive for Anglophone productions of Brecht's texts themselves. Both shows were politically important moments in the popular theatre not only because of their comic form, but also because they were created with a historical consciousness that was missing in the New York production of *Mother Courage*. By opening up an historical moment and critiquing it through comic manipulations, these two productions successfully achieved commercial theatre events that aligned with Brecht's concept of the dialectic theatre as a form of entertainment that is at once both humorous and powerfully political, interrogating the ideological underpinnings of the Anglo-American military-industrial complex.

Brecht and the English canon: William Gaskill

A notable figure who must be acknowledged in this process of Brechtian interventions was the director William Gaskill, whose 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was the only production of a Brecht play that was at all critically well-received in London. Gaskill shook up the hierarchies within the RSC and undertook a rehearsal process of improvisation, role-switching, and third-person narration on the part of the actors.⁴⁰⁵ There were mixed

⁴⁰⁵ Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 58-59.

critical reactions to the show, but according to theatre historian Margaret Eddershaw, the response was by and large positive, and Gaskill's production succeeded in moving "British Brecht a little closer—not merely in the imitative sense—to the Berliner model."⁴⁰⁶ Following his successes at the RSC, by 1963 William Gaskill was one of the main directors in the London theatre. Having worked under George Devine at the Royal Court and Peter Hall at the RSC, Gaskill was recruited by Laurence Olivier to be a resident director for the National Theatre, a new repertory company that would have its home at the Old Vic. Kenneth Tynan was the literary manager for the new venture, and arranged for the company heads to visit the Berliner Ensemble at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in East Berlin and meet with Helene Weigel. The choice of plays for the fledgling venture included "two Shakespeares, an Ibsen, a Chekhov, a Restoration comedy, a Greek tragedy, a play of the Manchester School and two new plays."⁴⁰⁷ Although the "straightforward" first season for the National Theatre did not include any Brecht, the influence of Tynan and the Berliner Ensemble upon Gaskill became evident in his choice of Restoration comedies, Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, which he had seen as Brecht's *Trumpets and Drums* in 1956. Recalling the effect that the Berliner Ensemble production of the English classic had on him, in his autobiography Gaskill writes that although it had "traces of campy," the show was "[e]arthy and funny and savage and tragic, [and] we'd never seen anything like it."⁴⁰⁸

The particular historical memory affixed to Restoration classics in the British theatre is an essential aspect of their productive potential. The reconsideration and re-visitation of classics is a staple of Brecht's theory of the historically concrete productive apparatus and its essential role in a critically dialectic theatre. Rather than proscribe outright the production of the classics of Western theatre, Brecht saw them

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁰⁷ Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction*, 56.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 13.

as fruitful sources for critical social and historical thinking. Brecht's use of earlier texts is not only a gesture of homage, a playfulness with his poetic heritage (although that is certainly a factor in the process of adaptation).⁴⁰⁹ Brecht's essay "The Primacy of the Apparatus"⁴¹⁰ offers additional insight to his approach to the dramatic canon as a living body of material rather than an archival reference point. In this essay, Brecht responds to the critic Diebold, who had written about the new "Piscator-Drama," pointing out the new possibilities for the dramatist in this revolutionary setting. Referencing Diebold's "new possibilities" for dramatists, Brecht argues rather, "why not new possibilities for the *theatre*, including old plays?" His first theatrical success was of course an adaptation of an old play, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, re-written as *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928, and he returned to the legacy of English comedy at the end of his life with *Pauken und Trompeten*. Brecht sharpened the political ambiguities of Farquhar's satire into a clear political question, but staging the original in London allowed for a specific, contemporary political and social critique that opened up a dialogue between nostalgia and satire.

Gaskill, explaining his decision to produce Farquhar's original work instead of the Brecht adaptation, wrote that he "saw no reason to put on an English translation of a German adaptation of a perfectly good English play."⁴¹¹ The English project was now to find the new possibilities in the old play. Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer* was written while Farquhar was himself (due to financial difficulties) serving as a recruiting officer for a company of grenadiers (specialized foot soldiers, similar to modern Special Forces) during the War of Spanish Succession. The hero of the play, Captain Frances Plume, is (like Farquhar himself) an officer assigned the task of

⁴⁰⁹ Brecht, "Classic Status as an Inhibiting Factor," in *Brecht on Theatre*.

⁴¹⁰ Brecht, "Primat des Apparatus," in *Schriften zum Theater I*, 135.

⁴¹¹ Gaskill, "Production Preface," in *The Recruiting Officer: The National Theatre Production*, ed. Tynan, 11.

recruiting soldiers for Queen Anne's army, stationed in Shrewsbury, in the English Midlands. The satire of the play begins with the captain's corrupt sergeant making use of the written law: specifically, the 1702 Mutiny Act, which commuted criminal sentences to war service, and the 1704 Act for Raising Recruits (known as the Pressing Act) which conscripted the "vagrant and unemployed." The patriotic and military motivation of the hero is echoed in the romantic action of the plot, as the political exigencies of war are mirrored by the financial and pragmatic exigencies of marriage within the English class system.

In adapting the original, Brecht strengthened the political commentary on the mechanics of imperialism (adjusting the time period from the early 18th-century "Queen Anne's War" on the Continent to the American Revolution) and made the class struggle overt by bolstering the plot importance of the working class characters. In producing Farquhar's play, however, Gaskill took advantage of the opportunity to reinstate the original contradictions between the English class system and its imperialistic ideologies. The Captain in the play is both a Restoration rake and a romantic hero, and he is constrained in both roles by the rules of the socio-economic game. The critics who accused Gaskill of interpolating "progressiveness" and a "social moral" into Farquhar's "comedy of manners"⁴¹² can only have given the original play a cursory glance. In his program note, Gaskill points out the continuing relevance of Farquhar's comic treatment both of militaristic collusion and of sexual relations.⁴¹³ For the pairs of lovers (Silvia and Captain Plume; Melinda and Worthy; Lucy and Captain Brazen), the romantic war of the sexes is always a fiscal arrangement, and the military realities and metaphors constantly remind the audience: the economy and class system drive it all. The effect of capital considerations upon

⁴¹² David Pryce-Jones's words, in his review for the *Spectator*. Reprinted in *The Recruiting Officer: The National Theatre Production*, ed. Tynan, 143.

⁴¹³ Gaskill, "Production Preface," *The Recruiting Officer: The National Theatre Production*, 11.

personal affection is exposed not only in the marital machinations of comedic convention but in the very familial relationships of the moneyed class. Personal relationships are always quantified by both social expectation (appropriate lineage; sufficient dowry; acceptable career, if any) and by monetary connection: a child is a capital investment, and a sibling a financial rival. Gaskill combined a Brechtian aspiration for a dialectical approach to the play with Brecht's respect for the historical concreteness of a play's framework. Just as *Mother Courage* very specifically plays out her contradictions in the setting of the Thirty Year's War, the good people of Shrewsbury are operating within the early 18th century atmosphere of military conscription. Reflecting on the play in his autobiography, Gaskill writes:

The intention of the play is not political, but there are scenes that present a political situation as accurately as the most committed writer could. The scene in which Plume and Kite between them manipulate Pearmain and Appletree into joining the army is as good a demonstration of jingoism as I know; the peasants are not stupid, but they are uneducated and fall for nationalism, sentimentality and violence as readily as soldiers going to the Falklands War.⁴¹⁴

The director let the critical potential of the play come through in its own historical form, letting the actors and the audience enjoy themselves and play along with the comedy.

A telling indication of the critical effect of the production comes from reading the reviews by the English press, which were starkly different depending upon the tenor of the publication. The only item universally agreed upon was the hilarious performance of Sir Laurence Olivier, a national treasure by this time, who obviously had a grand old time playing the secondary character of the *miles gloriosus* buffoon Captain Brazen. Reviewing the show for the *Times* of London, Irving Wardle singled

⁴¹⁴ Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction*, 58. Gaskill's autobiography was published in 1988, six years after the British warred with the Argentine government over the rights to the Falkland Islands and South Georgia in the south Atlantic Ocean. The war and Britain's victory, under the Thatcher administration, was a late twentieth-century British gesture of empire—heralded by some, but loudly protested by others.

out the recruiting scene that Gaskill would also recall 25 years later: “the most concentrated scene in the production is one showing the capture of two reluctant volunteers...[who] fall into the hands of Captain Plume, whose maxim is ‘those who know the least obey the best’...This scene – which reaches its climax when the two dupes are drawn, mesmerized, towards Plume’s outstretched hand – takes one far beyond the reaches of comedy.”⁴¹⁵ I take this as pertinent evidence of the Brechtian effect this production had upon the spectator: although highly entertaining with ribald comedy, the gestus of the recruiting officer results in a “concentrated” moment which focuses the laughter on its critical object.

Other critics were disturbed by the embodiment of military conscription and the central factors of class and economics that impel Farquhar’s satire. The reviewer for the *Guardian* recalled the Berliner Ensemble production of *Trumpets and Drums*, but felt that neither that nor Gaskill’s revival were as good as the 1943 production with Trevor Howard; undoubtedly this was a sentiment shared by those who were loath to abandon the long-standing English approach to Restoration comedy, a tradition of “high camp, lisps, huge wigs, canes and fans,”⁴¹⁶ which Gaskill deemed unnecessary. The abandonment of period archness was missed even more by David Pryce-Jones, reviewing for the culturally conservative *Spectator*, who insisted that “[s]tyle is what *The Recruiting Officer* needs.”⁴¹⁷ Gaskill refused to follow the nostalgic history of Restoration theatre, and the production confronted 20th century West End spectators with a forgotten (repressed?) example of its own theatre history. Acknowledging that his production “was hailed as a breakthrough in the presentation of period comedy,”

⁴¹⁵ Irving Wardle, Review of *The Recruiting Officer* (*The Times of London*, December 11, 1963). In *Postwar British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 134.

⁴¹⁶ Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction*. 56.

⁴¹⁷ David Pryce-Jones, Review of *The Recruiting Officer* (*The Spectator*). In *The Recruiting Officer: The National Theatre Production*, ed. Kenneth Tynan, 142.

Gaskill claims that “[a]ll I had tried to do was to make the text sound as if it was being spoken by real people in recognizable situations.”⁴¹⁸

The most dramatic evidence of the play’s critical effect is seen in the difference between the reviews in the most conservative and the most liberal London publications. Bernard Levin, in the *Daily Mail*, lambasted the “chilling fatuity” of Gaskill’s interpretation. Clarifying that the key elements of Restoration comedy are “gallants and ladies at amatory cross-purposes, sexual mistaken identities and venerous [sic] misunderstandings,” Levin attacked the production for underscoring the fable of military conscription and class manipulation. “The clue is, of course, ‘Brecht,’ and, yes, there are the old whore’s own words next to William Gaskill’s, full of the old, sweaty rubbish...What is going on down there? Are we going to have more of our classics forced through these Marxist imbecilities?”⁴¹⁹ There is a personal affront in this vehement reaction to the presence of political critique in a hallowed British classic. On the opposite end of the spectrum, B.A. Young in the always-iconoclastic *Punch* singled out the play for its immanent critique, and in an interesting analysis, celebrates the dialectical potential of the play’s comedy: “The difference between *The Recruiting Officer* and most other Restoration comedies is that the participants...care as much for their work as for their play; and what is more, it contains an element of social criticism that is no less evident because the wrong side, or what we would now consider the wrong side, is allowed to win.”⁴²⁰ In addition to revising the bourgeois traditions attached to the English classics, the production encouraged a critical debate regarding the political content of the English literary heritage. In this respect, the 1963 production of *The Recruiting Officer*, influenced by Brechtian aesthetics and

⁴¹⁸ Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction*. 57-58.

⁴¹⁹ Bernard Levin, Review of *The Recruiting Officer* (*The Daily Mail*, December 11, 1963). In *Postwar British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 136-137.

⁴²⁰ B.A. Young, Review of *The Recruiting Officer* (*Punch*, December 18, 1963). In *Postwar British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 137.

critique, is an important moment of subversive comedy appearing in the London mainstream.

An important distinction must be made regarding the National Theatre in London, however. Although “West End” in location and critical coverage, it was not literally commercial theatre, for it was only sustainable through public funding from the Arts Council. This is an item of extreme interest to the *Daily Mail*: the review begins with a reminder that the offending production is being presented at not “ordinary playhouse” but rather “our National Theatre subsidised to the tune of £130,000 a year.”⁴²¹ The use of public tax dollars to fund productions in the mainstream London theatre thus enters the story of the West End apparatus.⁴²² The National Theatre production of *The Recruiting Officer* was, among other things, an attack on the devolution of Restoration and 18th century English theatre into 20th century camp. The original Farquhar text, although it expresses patriotism as a salve for the potentially vitriolic effects of satire, is nevertheless struck through with a vein of moral ambiguity, most blatantly in the officer-gentleman hero. The political critique is all there, inherent within the classic, as Brecht pointed out: the ridiculousness of military fervor and labor is right there, along with the political corruption that feeds (and depends upon) the war machine. A close reading of the play supports theatre historian John Bull’s argument that “the real measure of the play’s move towards realism...[is that] in depicting the practicalities of recruitment, [Farquhar] introduces the possibility of seeing events from more than one class

⁴²¹ Levin, Review of *The Recruiting Officer* (*The Daily Mail*, December 11, 1963). In *Postwar British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 136.

⁴²² Grants from the British Arts Council, founded after World War II, were instrumental in establishing and supporting regional theatres in Britain. The Council began granting significant grants (£5,000 to £8,000) to the English Stage Company beginning in 1958. The enormous sum granted the National Theatre was vital to its founding and sustainability. See Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*.

perspective.”⁴²³ The conservative backlash to the political dialectics of the play’s comedy was, in part, an historical blindness to the national significance of English comedy and the ideas already contained within the theatrical tradition.⁴²⁴

The resistance to Tynan and Gaskill’s dramaturgical innovation comes from the challenge to history itself: the production ended the nostalgic approach to the British classics as historical documents, and it refused to soften satire into camp. Thus, the production was an attack on the image of London’s theatrical and literary legacy. In its engagement with the British theatre “apparatus,” we find a connection between this very traditional English drama and the legacy of the avant-garde as historicized by Peter Bürger. *The Recruiting Officer* is one of the gems of 18th century English theatre history: premiering in 1706, it was produced through the century, absent only for five seasons. In following Brecht’s exhortation to use classics to combat non-critical history, Gaskill and company scored a radical attack on a mainstream English tradition—using the public’s money and the “National” theatre to do so. By clarifying the history and social critique within Farquhar’s play, rather than treating it as a museum piece, the *Recruiting Officer* of 1963 attacked a tradition and way of life, manipulating the artistic institution it was working within. I am including the classic as a specifically English instance of radical comedy, because, like its sly creator who used his military service as material for his artistic career, it bit the hand that fed it: the institution of a “National” theatre and the English literary and theatrical “heritage.”

⁴²³ Bull, “Sir John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar in the Post-Restoration Age,” in *A Companion to Restoration Drama*, 444.

⁴²⁴ Historians’ virtual omission of the female playwrights of the Restoration and the 18th century is another example of the erasure of critical perspectives from this period in theatre and literary histories; as Melinda C. Finberg points out, it was not until the late twentieth-century that there was a resurgence of interest in the work of Aphra Behn, for instance (*Eighteenth-Century Women Dramatists*).

So, with Gaskill's success at the Royal Shakespeare Company and with the new National Theatre, what happened to the potential for popular Brechtian critique in the main London theatres? Unfortunately, other than his success with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Gaskill was unable to replicate the mixture of entertainment and sharp critique in Brecht's dramas. A critically (and for the director and actors, personally) unsatisfactory production of *Mother Courage* followed in the National Theatre's 1964-1965 season, and an equally panned production of *Man is Man* appeared later in 1965.⁴²⁵ With Gaskill as the main proponent of Brechtian techniques, including his desire for a politically united ensemble and an ensemble-based repertory, his failure in continuing to connect the London audience with Brecht's works greatly affected the receptivity of the theatre-going community. Harold Hobson provided insight into the British inability to successfully produce Brecht in 1965: "'Because he is a progressive writer, [directors] assumed that the reactionary characters in his plays must be absurd. They make them absurd and stop at that. They create no sense of power or conflict. Behind the joke the threat is missing.'"⁴²⁶ The use of a Marxist historical dialectic to interpret a familiar English play worked, though. New material, that directly engaged with the audience's historical frame of reference, began to exhibit the Brechtian joke of contradictions, in the form of a series of comedy sketches.

The University Wits of the 1960s: *Beyond the Fringe*

The four writer-performers of *Beyond the Fringe*—Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, and Dudley Moore—were graduates of Oxford and Cambridge when an assistant producer for the Edinburgh Festival brought them together for a late-night revue show that was to be competition for the unofficial performances of the Fringe Festival. The 1960 revue was enough of a hit to convince producers William

⁴²⁵ Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 63.

⁴²⁶ Harold Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, September 15, 1965, as quoted in Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 65.

Donaldson and Donald Albery to mount it on the West End, and a substantially longer and revised version opened on May 10, 1961 to rave reviews. Instead of the originally scheduled 6-week run, the original cast performed at the Fortune Theatre for a year, at which point a substitute cast took over. The four writer-performers (Cook, Bennett, Miller, and Moore) took their show, with several new sketches, to the John Golden Theatre on Broadway in October of 1962 for a year's run. They presented a gala performance of a further revised version at the Mayfair Theatre in 1964, and the show—with a replacement cast—played at the Mayfair Theatre for two more years. Three of the original cast members, with Paxton Whitehead replacing Jonathan Miller, returned to Broadway for another run in 1964.⁴²⁷

The comic sketches range from sharp political satire to uncomfortable class commentary to the whimsical and downright silly, and it is intriguing that in the notes written for a 1987 printing of the script and its various versions, the editor Roger Wilmut attests that cast members “were simply trying to be as funny as possible and had deep suspicions of anything as polemical as satire.”⁴²⁸ Wilmut himself claims that the show “could be said to be satirical in the broader sense of social satire, but only in that its main purpose was to be funny, and intelligent satire was just one of the techniques it used.”⁴²⁹ Indeed, there is a good deal of pure, unabashed silliness in the sketches, and a good half of them are concerned predominantly with sending-up everyday pretensions and miscommunications. Like Karl Valentin (the Munich beer-hall comedian who profoundly influenced Brecht), however, the four writer-performers mixed in extremely sharp and even, at moments, disconcerting confrontations in equal amounts with the social comedy.

⁴²⁷ Roger Wilmut, “A Performance History,” in *The Complete Beyond the Fringe*, Bennett et al., 122.

⁴²⁸ Wilmut, “A Performance History,” 125.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

The opening scene for the London show was changed for New York, but they both followed a similar structure and resounded the same theme: a jolly critique of national identities. Both sketches began with Dudley Moore (an extremely gifted musician, whose talents as a pianist and parodist were invaluable to the show) playing a national tune, in the one instance “God Save the Queen” and in the other “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The London sketch, “Steppes in the Right Direction,”⁴³⁰ proceeds with the other three attempting to convert Dudley (identified as a member of the Moscow State Circus) to the “British Way of Life,” but their efforts somehow go astray when they decide that “[Prime Minister] Macmillan (raspberry)” has a better ring to it than “Macmillan...mmmm!” The ridiculousness of their “indoctrination” tactics is quite broad comedy, and there are certainly broad, general zingers (“Alan, you lull his suspicions, look fat and contented—symbolise the British way of life”). But beneath the surface lingers a sharp reflection on the banality of contemporary political belief. Alan, Jon, and Peter (the characters) collectively have no sense or process of political thought; Cold War rivalry is treated as akin to that of football teams. This insouciance is repeated in the American version, in which they blithely rib both American fear-mongering and British cynicism:

Jon: I’ll tell you one thing I do very much admire about Americans, and that is they do have something to believe in. I mean, they really believe in anti-Communism.

Dudley: Oh God, I wish we had a positive faith like that in England.

Peter: Yes, it does give you something to hold on to, doesn’t it? (134)

The sketches, taken individually, might be read as snide mockeries of Cold War politics, written with the intelligence that befits a group of Oxbridge lads but falling on the side of cynicism rather than critique. When taken as part of the show as a whole, however, the accumulated effect of cynicism, silliness, and irony operates, in fact, as a

⁴³⁰ Bennett et al., *The Complete Beyond the Fringe*, 11-15. Quotations from the script shall henceforth be cited in-text.

comic dialectic of history. Historical myths, the military-industrial complex, and the global connections behind national social welfare are each succinctly exposed in short, tightly-written scenes that can be interpreted through Brecht's theory of the *gestus*: "By this term we encompass a complete complex of singular *gests* of different manners and utterances, which are the basis of unusual events among human beings and refer to the collective attitude of all those concerned with this event...A *gestus* shows the relationship of persons to each other."⁴³¹

The sketch "Civil War," for instance, is both a cruel mockery of the senselessness of a "mutual deterrence" policy and an exposé of how all levels of society are invested in perpetuating the political and social structures that enable the Cold War. The representatives of the Civil Defence ministry (Alan, Peter, and Jon) are at turns pedantic, bureaucratic, and jingoistic. Jon, for one, excitedly describes how after "if we are lucky enough in any future conflict to be the aggressor, we are in a position to inflict a blow of twenty, thirty, or even forty mega-deaths...[after which we can] bring our score up into the seventy or even eighty mega-death bracket, which is practically the maximum score permitted by the Geneva Convention" (80). The other panelists and the local audience (represented by Dudley) completely accept this (recurrent) football match perspective on the impending nuclear holocaust. The overarching punchline to the entire situation is evident in the local townspeople's only apparent concern regarding civil defence and nuclear attacks: "Following the nuclear holocaust," Dudley asks, "could you tell me when normal public services would be resumed?" (81). The average citizen's self-concern with social services is both a hilarious send-up of political disinterest but also a disturbing reflection of the deep-

⁴³¹ Brecht, "Gestik," from "Neue Technik der Schauspielkunst 2," in *Schriften zum Theater II*, 753. („Darunter verstehen wir einen ganzen Komplex einzelner Gesten der verschiedensten Art zusammen mit Äußerungen, welcher einem absonderbaren Vorgang unter Menschen zugrunde liegt und die Gesamthaltung aller an diesem Vorgang Beteiligten betrifft...Ein Gestus zeichnet die Beziehungen von Menschen zueinander.“)

rooted complacency that is necessary to sustain a system of high-cost military acceleration. This sharp, irresolvable conflict inherent in modern life underlies other sketches as well, such as Peter Cook's "T.V. P.M.," in which he mimics the Prime Minister (Macmillan) celebrating a visit to President Kennedy; or Alan Bennett's first monologue, as a working-class "Boring Old Man" (as he later described it) who lambasted all those "so-called intellectuals...learned... intolerant" who protest against the hydrogen bomb and South Africa: "this is a democracy. Government isn't run by people like that, it's run by the people" (22-24). These sketches skewer, at a very deep level, the pervasive investment in a socio-political-economic structure that depends upon myths of nationalism and class schisms in order to sustain military build-up and social exploitation. Whether the comedians wished it or no, the bite of their comedy made it thought-provoking satire—in addition to being very, very funny.

Perhaps the most daring of sketches (in London, at least) was the "Aftermyth of War," which laid bare the banality of sentimental portrayals of World War II as a "noble" war. Wilmut writes that during the 1961 preview week at Brighton, one audience member shook his fist at the performers and stormed out, and writes that "this sketch caused persistent trouble among people who saw it as mocking those who lost their lives in the war, rather than the sentimentalised 'stiff-upper-lip' attitude of so many British films of the period" (124). Like the critics who opposed to a Restoration classic without a super-imposed layer of camp, some audience members were offended by a narrative that cracked the myths that structured the historiography of World War II. There are sublime moments of tart satire, such as when an commanding officer decrees that "Perkins" must lay down his life for the "team," because they "need a futile gesture at this stage. It will raise the whole tone of the war" (71). But the real genius of the long sketch is that alongside the obvious comic moments, they have embedded subtle digs at a banal, romanticized nostalgia for war,

such as Jon's bombastic, propagandistic reflection that "Young men, scarcely boys, tossed aside youthful things and grew up overnight in the grimmer game that is war." Subtler, but even more biting, is Alan's ex-RAF pilot, who recalls shooting down a German fighter and claims, as it went down, the pilot smiled back (71)—two gallant young men playing by team-rules, the monologue implies, and indeed, the language of sport ripples through this sketch as with the other military satires.

The production design was minimalist-utilitarian, a style similar to (although not unique to) Brechtian design. The set was a one-piece unit that flexibly served as balcony, stairs, piano, and trap door; the performers wore their own "lad-casual" clothes: slacks, button-down and tie with a V-neck sweater overtop. With a Brechtian placard, the "Civil War" sketch posed the question, "What about the hundreds of survivors?". Similarly, "The Suspense is Killing Me" (a sketch about a condemned man about to hang) is prefaced by Peter Cook, who holds a sign for "A Death Cell" and exits. He re-enters at the end, declaring "I think it should be done in public," using the gesture of music-hall or cabaret banter-with-the-audience to challenge idea of private/ democratic executions (89). Moore's songs punctuated the piece, sometimes as individual units, sometimes as accompaniments within other sketches. Moore's brilliance as a musician resulted in some wonderful satires of High Art, including the "Colonel Bogey March" interpreted as a classical variation (with a never-ending Coda); a short, dead-on setting of "Little Miss Muffet" by "Benjamin Britten." Brecht was specifically evoked with Moore's delicious "Weill/Brecht" song, which was first added in the Broadway run. In lyrics and music the piece evokes "The Alabama Song"; "Pirate Jenny"; "Barbara Song"; "The Bilbao Song"; and "Surabaya Johnny"—while consisting of gibberish German. We can surmise that an assumed general familiarity with Brecht and Weill in New York was the inspiration for the piece; the audience's delight in the only filmed version of the show (from a 1964 gala

performance in London⁴³²) provides wonderful evidence of the recognizable nature of the Brecht/Weill oeuvre among West End theatre-goers as well at the time.

The critical response to the show was, in Wilmut's words, "ecstatic." Kenneth Tynan declared that "Future historians may well thank me for providing them with a full account of the moment when English comedy took its first decisive step into the second half of the twentieth century."⁴³³ The leading British theatre magazine, *Encore*, opened its July-August 1961 issue with a note from the editor on the seminal importance of the show, which has "forced a bridgehead...Anti-Establishment forces are beginning to gather their strength."⁴³⁴ Howard Taubman, reviewing the Broadway production in the *New York Times* the following year, did not describe the show with the same watershed language, in large part because of the presence of satirical stand-up comedy in America, exemplified by Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. This absence in Britain had been sharply noted by Tynan in an influential essay in the *Observer*, "A Gap Defined: 1960." Tynan describes the work being done in American clubs, and laments that in Britain they "lack a place in which intelligent, likeminded people can spend a cheap evening listening to forthright cabaret that is socially, sexually and politically pungent."⁴³⁵ His reaction to *Fringe* and the reviews in *Encore* were in part a celebration of the emergence of highly visible and successful satiric comedy in London. Writing from New York, Taubman's review is most notable for his repeated exclamations of how funny he finds the show, which he then in turn qualifies with several descriptions of its bite (in fact, he calls the "lads" serpents with envenomed fangs).⁴³⁶ Thus, he describes how the audience will be "shaking so hard with laughter that you'll forget momentarily to tremble with fear," how the skits "touch lightly or

⁴³² Bennett et al., *Beyond the Fringe*, DVD.

⁴³³ Tynan, "Beyond the Fringe," in *Tynan Right & Left*, 66.

⁴³⁴ *Encore*, "A View from the Gods," 7.

⁴³⁵ Tynan, *Tynan Right & Left*, 47-49.

⁴³⁶ Taubman, "The Theater: Satire as a Silver Lining," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1962.

savagely” on a long list of topics, and that “Aftermyth of War,” for example, is “biting as well as funny.” The show was critically and financially successful enough to sustain a 667-performance run on Broadway.⁴³⁷

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the phenomenal success of *Beyond the Fringe*, however, is its virtual effacement from British theatre history.⁴³⁸ Despite its success in a West End theatre, the publication of the script in 1963 and its repeated transfers to Broadway, the production has been occluded from the history of postwar British drama, and has instead been located in a performance history of satirical comedy in print and television. And yet, the show was at the time most definitely considered to be a shot in the arm for the theatre industry, specifically. The filmed gala performance in 1964 begins with a narrated tour through London’s West End, which gives us a comprehensive history of the district from the 17th century hits at Drury Lane and Covent Garden through to the contemporary stars and hits, celebrating Laurence Olivier and Peter O’Toole as the camera pans through the marquees for *Oliver!*, *She Loves Me*, *Boeing-Boeing* and the other hits of the season. Included in this history is “May 10, 1961 [when] four young men burst upon this scene...and made history.” Concluding this tour, we are re-introduced to “a production that began here—on London’s West End.” Likewise, the Broadway establishment embraced the production as one of its own success-stories. While the New York Drama Critics Circle and the Tony Awards for Best Play went to *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the Drama Critics Circle awarded no “Best Foreign Play” award. Instead, the Critics awarded a “special citation” to *Beyond the Fringe*, not counting the evening of

⁴³⁷ Internet Broadway Database. <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2927>>.

⁴³⁸ The production warrants no mention in Dominic Shellard’s history for Yale University Press (*British Theatre Since the War*); neither is it mentioned in Richard Eyre’s and Nicholas Wright’s popular history for Bloomsbury (U.K.) and Knopf (U.S.), *Changing Stages*. Likewise, the reviews for the show are not included in *Post-war British Theatre Criticism* (ed. Elsom), despite the fact that it was one of the biggest hits on the West End through the early 1960s.

sketches as a “play,” apparently, but simultaneously deeming the production to be a more noteworthy contribution to the New York stage than its (dramatic) competitors.⁴³⁹ Likewise, Bennett, Cook, Miller and Moore received a special Tony Award for “their brilliance, which has shattered all of the old conceptions of comedy.”⁴⁴⁰ By reconsidering the enormous success of this production on both sides of the Atlantic in the light of the concurrent shifts in political critique and comic confrontation, I hope to re-insert this important theatrical event into the history of Brechtian entertainment as an emerging mode of critique in the popular Anglo-American theatre.

Oh What a Lovely War: Stratford East and the West End

William Gaskill pointed out in his program note to the audiences of *The Recruiting Officer* that there is no longer direct recruitment for a war, and that conscription is no longer practiced. So what is the relationship between the public and the sly comedy of the recruiting officer and his sergeant? The perennial lesson lies in the manipulation of history: the image of the fallen hero is perhaps the most nefarious weapon in any nation’s arsenal. Farquhar used the image of the military “hero” to comic ends, and played with the patriotic image of British victory against the French. Gaskill did not profess to “insert” anything, but rather wished for the play’s satire to resonate again: “what we recognize from our experience is the systematic deception of the ignorant to a pointless end by the use of the heroic images of the past, a past no longer relevant. We may laugh at Pearmain and Appletree, but we recognise our own plight.” This manipulation of nostalgia for war was also the inspiration for one of the most incisive sketches in *Beyond the Fringe*. Theatre Workshop’s enormous success in 1963, *Oh What a Lovely War*, was a likewise radical attack on not only a system

⁴³⁹ Hewes, ed., *The Burns Mantle Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1962-1963*, 370.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 375.

that manufactures war, but also on the dangerous effects of history. Lionel Abel's thesis in *Metatheatre*, a contemporaneous work of dramatic theory, argued that the metaphysical constructs of a true tragedy are ideals that pit good against good and must have an acknowledged life outside of the dramatist's construction; in a true tragedy, there is no moment where one can say, "well, they ought to have known better." With the modern self-consciousness of human action in the world (which includes all historical thinking), the transcendence of irrevocable forces is now myth.⁴⁴¹ The metatheatrical nature of the Brechtian-influenced musical precluded tragedy. The dialogue through *Oh What a Lovely War* intimates a mocking challenge: "yes, we ought to have known better. Weren't we silly? But will we next time: has anything changed?" The Brechtian influence on Theatre Workshop was a catalyst for adaptation, operating alongside a large legacy of formal influences. Most importantly, Joan Littlewood, the artistic director of the company, followed the Brechtian principle of a theatre for pleasure and instruction: the dialogue with the audience was not just an interaction based on shared pleasure (in this case, a combination of music-hall song and comedy and the British traditions of seaside pierrot variety shows and broad Panto farce), but it was also an engagement of critical dialogue, a commitment to historical and political debate.

Theatre Workshop was founded by Ewan MacColl (then Jimmy Miller), Gerry Raffles and Joan Littlewood, who had run a political workers' theatre in Manchester first called Theatre of Action and then Theatre Union from 1934 until 1942, when the war made it impossible to maintain a stable company.⁴⁴² Re-formed as Theatre Workshop in 1945, the company toured northern England and Welsh mining towns for

⁴⁴¹ Abel, *Metatheatre*.

⁴⁴² For a full history of Theatre Workshop and its antecedents, see Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*; Joan Littlewood's *Joan's Book*; and Nadine Holdsworth's *Joan Littlewood* (London: Routledge, 2006).

eight years, until in 1953 they moved to London with a permanent theatre building, the Theatre Royal – not in the West End, however, but rather the East End (working class) district of London, in Stratford. At Stratford East, Littlewood (with her partner and general manager Gerry Raffles; MacColl left the company when it moved to London, becoming a political activist/folk singer) developed new playwrights and developed critical acclaim for the company, despite a perpetual lack of money. The company was never really supported by the Arts Council; Howard Goorney documents that occasionally in the late fifties and early sixties the theatre would get a grant of £1,000 or £2,000, but never any funding that would support a company.⁴⁴³ In *British Theatre Since the War*, Dominic Shellard provides a very telling chart that reveals the gross disparity in Arts Council funding, comparing Theatre Workshop to the English Stage Company (at the Royal Court).⁴⁴⁴ For the 1962-1963 season, Theatre Workshop's grant had been raised to only £3,000, in contrast to the £20,000 granted to the ESC (and the £130,000 granted to the new National Theatre). The company at Stratford East was generally kept solvent by the repeated transfer of successful shows to commercial theatres in the West End, a practice that grated against Littlewood's sensibilities. Theatre Workshop company member and historian Howard Goorney quotes Littlewood's lament: "We are forced to export our shows to the West End and are always losing our companies. We are hamstrung by the money grubbing commercialism of the West End."⁴⁴⁵ Frustrated, Littlewood left England in 1962 and went to Nigeria to work with Wole Soyinka. Upon her return in 1963, she embarked upon what would end up being Theatre Workshop's most renowned project, both at Stratford East and on the West End. *Oh What a Lovely War* is a fascinating example

⁴⁴³ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 109; 123.

⁴⁴⁴ Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, 63.

⁴⁴⁵ Quoted in Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 123.

of the tension between the radical and the commercial on the West End in the early sixties, a fine balance that continued on Broadway.

The show had its inception from a 1962 BBC radio program created by Charles Chilton, a soldiers' history of World War I punctuated by popular songs from the era, especially those sung by the soldiers. Gerry Raffles (a WWII veteran, as were several of the original company members, including designer John Bury) began work with Chilton on a narrative theatrical adaptation while Littlewood was in Africa, without much enthusiasm from the resident company at Stratford East. Upon her return, however, Littlewood took over the project, and took advantage of her grab-bag of theatrical mechanisms. "They must all be pierrots," she recalled in her autobiography, recounting her conversation with Raffles. "The War is a pierrot show. It's the right period and, after all, war is only for clowns."⁴⁴⁶ This combination of insouciance and bite is characteristic of the entire show. Although the BBC singers were originally brought in to be part of the project, they soon scattered (along with Chilton) when confronted with Littlewood's determination to "get rid of all that beautiful expression." Littlewood amusingly recounts the tension between the Workshop company members and the professional BBC singers. Brian Murphy complained that the music director's tempos were putting them all to sleep, and when Griffith Davies complained about the "sloppy stuff," Littlewood remarks that "the BBC chaps looked uneasy."⁴⁴⁷ The battle over the music indicates the company's continual efforts to keep nostalgia and sentiment from controlling the musical they were creating, a creative tension that informed the entire production. Littlewood understood her

⁴⁴⁶ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 675. "Pierrot" clown variety shows at seaside pavilions were part of popular British performance from the Edwardian period through the 1930s, with a heritage in 19th century pantomime and clowning and a continued legacy in music-hall comedy routines; the musical is thus also an engagement with British theatre history, amidst which the Brechtian techniques are layered, similar to the dialogue engaged with *The Recruiting Officer*.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 676.

company's reticence. She describes her knee-jerk reaction to the earnest memorials of her childhood, the "photos of dead soldiers in silver frames, medals in a forgotten drawer": "God, how I loathed those songs – but the pierrot show..."⁴⁴⁸ Khaki and guns were absolutely forbidden in this show about the First World War.⁴⁴⁹ Littlewood began the development process with a Brechtian approach to history and a clown's interpretation of the archive, a process that was itself a modification of one of Brecht's tactics: co-opting popular performance practices such as cabaret music and comedy sketches, street performance, and sport practices as well. The musical developed into a chronological narrative of the First World War, from the European powder-keg of 1914 and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand through the four years of trench fighting. The story is told through vignettes and songs, from the recruitment centers on the Home Front to the trenches, including the officers at HQ and the factory workers at home.

The musical opens with the M.C., played by Victor Spinetti in the original cast, corrals the Merry Rooster Pierrots for their opening number, the sea-side variety number "Row, Row, Row," and then vamps with jokes while the clowns get ready for the "ever popular War Game" circus parade, led by a cartwheeling pierrot (3). The first part of the Game: "Find the Thief." The cast acts out national stereotypes, paints a picture of the European powder-keg of 1914, plays around with the seminal assassination in Sarajevo, sings its way through the rape of Brussels, and creates a farce out of the relationship between the French and British generals. One of the first-

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ The show can also be interpreted within a legacy of World War I plays, such as the sentimental one-acts of J.M. Barrie ("The Old Lady Shows Her Medals," 1917; "A Well-Remembered Voice," 1918); G.B. Shaw's pungent comedies (the direct satire of "O'Flaherty V.C." 1915 and the more allegorical *Heartbreak House*, 1919); Edna St. Vincent Millay's pastoral allegory *Aria da Capo*, 1919; and also the post-war dramas such as Sean O'Casey's expressionist *The Silver Tassie* (unsuccessful in 1928) and R.C. Sherriff's naturalistic tragedy *Journey's End* (which enjoyed a 2-year West End run beginning in 1929). While none of these earlier dramas are directly mentioned in any of the development histories of *Oh What a Lovely War*, they are no doubt part of its "collective" dramatic legacy along with the popular performance legacies of Panto, pierrot, and music-hall.

act gems is the drilling scene, in which the M.C. comes on as a sergeant to drill the green recruits. Raffles had brought in a real drill sergeant to work with the men, and Littlewood recalls that they tried, “but the fiercer they looked the funnier it became.”⁴⁵⁰ The actors were only armed with canes and parasols, and besides, a on-stage sergeant could never truly re-create the marine’s barrage of insults: due to the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship, any profanity would get the show shut down. The solution? Like Brecht, Littlewood welcomed actors’ contributions that added comic texture to the presentation, and the sergeant, Victor Spinetti, solved the problem with the ridiculous: “Don’t think the audience would have a clue as to what he was saying,” Spinetti recalls suggesting to Littlewood during rehearsal; “I know I didn’t when I was in the army. It was ‘Yer uckenspinskerdereye. Yersilbucharficsuden.’”⁴⁵¹ Performed in gibberish, the drilling scene is a masterpiece of farce, singled out as a tear-inducing comic interlude by the majority of critics. The ridiculous tradition of abusing male recruits is book-ended with important reminders of women’s roles in the system. The War Game includes plenty of sex, and we see the complicity of women in the music-hall numbers from the period, “Hold Your Hand Out, Naughty Boy” and “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” the latter accompanied by coercive visuals (*1914 poster: “Women of Britain say – ‘GO’”*) (19). The stage indeed becomes a circus, with three rings (the actors, the newspanel, and the slide screen) and constantly revolving routines.

Besides the emphasis on clowns and fun, Littlewood also sought out the estranging aids of on-stage text. She made a priority of getting a newspanel, “like the one that goes over the Friedrichstrasse in East Berlin,”⁴⁵² and a screen on which slides could be projected throughout the show. The multiple sensory impact of the show is

⁴⁵⁰ Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 681.

⁴⁵¹ Victor Spinetti, “Afterword,” in *Oh What a Lovely War*, Theatre Workshop, 90. Spinetti, alas, never tells us what he was *really* saying.

⁴⁵² Ibid. 677.

one of its defining qualities. The ticker-tape electric light newspanel is the most frightening voice in the show: disembodied, pithy, and completely impartial, the electric board presents a relentless barrage of statistics. As the first British wounded of the war walk off stage, and a girl singer begins to sing a music-hall song from the period, the newspanel efficiently reports “300,000 ALLIED CASUALTIES DURING AUGUST.”⁴⁵³ As the Field Marshal and his generals discuss strategy, the newspanel chips in with the handy update: “FEBRUARY...VERDUN...TOTAL LOSS ONE AND A HALF MILLION MEN” (60). Like a psychotic electronic footnote-machine, the electric ticker-tape sign upstage calmly and unceasingly provides the audience with the necessary references as the performers play out the War Game from scene to scene.

In this manner, the musical is itself a dialogue between the exacting documentarian and music-hall protocol. Songs from both popular entertainment and from the trenches are included, as well as documented incidents from the daily life of trench warfare. Interactions between British military leaders and pacifist activism on the home front are mixed into the action, which is inexorably driven forward by the newspanel’s dates, names, and statistics. The company did exhaustive research, and in addition to the songs, documentary photographs, and historic posters, the entire company searched through memoirs, histories, and collected periodicals from the period to write the dialogue, scenes, and newspanel information. A long list of source material indicates that the company culled journal entries, situations, and statistics from references such as Haig’s diaries, Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, *The Times History of the War*, and General Ludendorff’s *My War*

⁴⁵³ Theatre Workshop, *Oh What a Lovely War*. 28. Page numbers from this version of the play-script will be indicated in-text.

Memories.⁴⁵⁴ The show becomes an investigation of how to tell the history of World War I. The most influential sources were several recent books which had revisited the war as a social history of the class system and exploitation, especially the books *In Flanders Fields* from 1959 and *The Donkeys* from 1961.⁴⁵⁵ These histories were the dominant influences on the show's narrative structure and general historiographical voice. But here it is also useful to recall Freddie Rokem's description of the actor as a "hyper-historian."⁴⁵⁶ The multiple "as-ifs" of the performers – the actors as clowns, as soldiers and nurses, and as historical researchers of a later generation – create a special epistemological space for a dialogue of historical causality and experience. The show reinforces the practice of history as a performative act, and this intervention in World War I historiography is enhanced by the interplay between the ideological perspective of contemporary scholarship and the varied historicities of the musical's influences: music-hall songs, seaside pavilion pierrot shows, Panto burlesque, radio plays, and the more recently introduced Brechtian techniques.⁴⁵⁷

The use of character is another interesting element of the play's construction. The soldiers in the trenches are not named, but a trickster-character theme continues throughout the show. At the first Christmas, the famous 1914 ad hoc truce, the Tommies reciprocate the Jerries' rendition of "Stille Nacht" with a ribald anthem. During the trench carnage of 1916, a Sergeant responds to an order to get rid of a decaying limb sticking out of the parapet with: "An' what the bloody 'ell will I hang

⁴⁵⁴ A comprehensive list of source materials is included in the Methuen publication of *Oh What a Lovely War*, 94-95.

⁴⁵⁵ Paget, "Popularising popular history," *Critical Survey* (1990), 120.

⁴⁵⁶ Rokem, *Performing History*, 13.

⁴⁵⁷ William B. Worthen's analysis of John Osbourne's 1957 play *The Entertainer* (which starred Laurence Olivier) notes its similar use of the music-hall tradition as "dialogic rather than nostalgic" (Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, 157). In "The Last Laugh: Comedy as a Political Touchstone in Britain from *The Entertainer* to *Comedians*," John Harrop explains how Osbourne's play uses the decline of the music-hall as an allegory for the decline of Britain as an imperial power (*Theatre Journal*, March 1980, p. 8).

my equipment on” (51). The original production used the entire theatre to immerse the audience in the world of the soldiers, using balconies and aisles:

Australian Voice: (*distant, high up in the auditorium*) Are you the reinforcements?

Sergeant: Yeah! On our way up to Vimy.

Voice: Wouldn't go up there if I were you; they've got a shortage!

Soldier: What of? Ammunition?

Voice: No. Coffins! (69)

The morbid gallows humor is one of the hallmarks of the show, and it contributes to the general characterization of the unnamed soldiers. The British military leaders, however, are specifically portrayed. In the first act, the dramaturgs took advantage of a historian's description of Field Marshal Sir John French, and they sketched a comic scene in which French (refusing a translator) stumbles his way through an early (1914) conference with the French commander Lanrezac and the General of the defeated Belgian forces, Moranneville. The scene plays like a military version of “Who's on First?”, with Field Marshal French calling “Ahoy!” for the tactical bridge at Huy, and the angry French general suggesting that perhaps the Germans are merely going fishing there (24). As the logistical “conference” draws to an end, the bemused Belgian general points out “[s]o far, to help us, we have received a visit from one staff officer—to observe. Decisive action by Britain—and France—while my troops were holding Liège, and the war would have been over by now” (25). Taking little heed of Moranneville's exit, French bestows another medal on Lanrezac's decorated uniform, and the officers' war game continues.

The economics and politics of the War Game is also played out in the three-ring circus. In the second act, Sylvia Pankhurst tries to rally a war protest from a soap-box, only to be shouted down by the wild, patriotic crowd. The crowd not only shouts her down: the roar turns into a chorus of “Rule Britannia,” the grossest of national hymns, sung as the newpanel informs of the loss of 60,000 British soldiers on

the first day of the Somme push. The game accelerates through the second act, which barrels through the hallowed battles of Verdun and the Somme at breakneck speed, offering glimpses of the daily life of the soldiers in tandem with political machinations. The careful placement of the scenes prohibits the spectator from any continued affective response, a structural Brechtian tactic. A visit from a Commanding Officer brings us into the world of trenches that reek of decomposing bodies. The Officer's pathetic attempt to gloss over a self-inflicted gas attack ("that gas of ours was pretty nasty – damned wind changing...But these mishaps do happen in war, and gas can be a war-winning weapon" [49]) is greeted by steely resignation on the part of the trench Lieutenant and the aforementioned joke about the random leg "obstructing" the parapet. The multiple layers of class indictment, violence, and morbid humor may engender sympathy, horror, and grim amusement in the audience. The immediate switch then to an upper-crust evening party on the Home Front cuts short the visceral reaction to the world of the soldier and stokes a pan-historic political anger.

The "Roses of Picardy" scene that follows the trench scene satirizes the entire political and class system that served as the structural architecture for the military massacre. Haig, although drawn as a remarkably callous and narrow-minded military leader through the remainder of the war, is introduced as just part of an entire system that was designed for industrial-sized slaughter. All of the main players in the top military (and political) circle are introduced as players in their own circus ring, waltzing around a potted plant (played by a Pierrot) and playing their own games of intrigue and survival. Haig is belittled behind his back for coming from a trade background; Sir John French is mocked for his bad judgment. The parties recall past acquaintances in the colonies ("Karachi!" "Polo ponies!") and, pointedly, the only mention made of the soldiers at the front lines is a reassurance that they are "just

spoiling for a fight” (Haig, 56). The carefully choreographed waltz scene emphasizes the political tactical maneuvers that are making the rules of the War Game.

The most horrifying character in the musical is, without a doubt, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, who is mercilessly demonized in the show. Serving as Field Marshal from 1916 till the end of the war, Haig oversaw the enormous pushes that led to mass slaughter—the exact term used by a British General in the first scene following Haig’s assumption of command. The Haig portrayed in Theatre Workshop’s history of WWI is a carefully constructed figure, whose journal entries are spoken over pointedly satirical singing by the troops: “It is our duty to attack the enemy until his last resources are exhausted and his line breaks,” declares Haig as the Pierrot-Tommies line up for the Somme behind him; “I am the predestined instrument of providence for the achievement of victory for the British Army” (67-68). There was a very conscious dramaturgical effort made to paint this self-absorbed picture of Haig, especially by emphasizing his motives in terms of class warfare; for instance, his journal entry lamenting an incident in which the King was thrown by Haig’s horse is read in the midst of the slaughter of the Somme (1916), while the incident was actually recorded in an entry from October 28, 1915, when Haig was anticipating his promotion to Field Marshal.⁴⁵⁸ “The tendency,” Derek Paget points out, “is thus to make Haig seem *callous* as well as ambitious.” The British critics certainly noticed the personal indictment of Haig in the show: “The villain of the piece,” wrote Bernard Levin in his *Daily Mail* review, “squarely and without reservations, is Haig.”⁴⁵⁹ The excoriation of the Field Marshal, as a specific villain of the piece, is an unusually traditional dramaturgical device, and is perhaps too one-sided and personal for a true social commentary. The over-arching construction of the show, however, is

⁴⁵⁸ This twist of documentation was pointed out by Derek Paget in “Popularising popular history,” 124.

⁴⁵⁹ Bernard Levin, *Oh What a Lovely War* (review in *The Daily Mail*, March 20, 1963), in *Postwar Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 111.

masterfully designed to prevent specific emotional attachments on the part of the audience.

Like Shaw's *Major Barbara* and Brecht's *Mother Courage*, two important dramatic ancestors, *Oh What a Lovely War* indicts the political, social and economic structures that make war a profitable (and thus desirable) enterprise, the War Game plays through the vast network of mechanisms that made the war impossible to stop. The inequities of the British class system, highlighted by the officers' cluelessness, is only one social condemnation. The most obvious Marxist moment in the show is near the beginning of the second act, when the profitable nature of war is overtly stated by an international assembly of businessmen gathered at a Scottish grouse-hunting party, the "War Profiteers" scene. "21,000 AMERICANS BECAME MILLIONAIRES DURING THE WAR," we are informed by the newspanel (41), but together with the American we also meet a German, a French, and a British manufacturer as well as a Swiss banker, all of whom are intent upon the smooth workings of the war-time industry. What might be an overly idealist counterpoint in the figure of the Scottish ghillie only reaffirms the complex necessity of war: informing the "lords" of his six family members at the front, he says of his mother, "She's very proud of them, and the allowance helps her and me quite a bit" (44). The stubborn nationalism of the working classes is further revealed for its self-destructive tendencies, such as with the aforementioned "Hail Britannia!" moment at Mrs. Pankhurst's soap box. "My ole man's at the front—" protests one woman in the crowd; "Don't ask me, love. I'miggerant!" a man in the crowd petulantly retorts to Pankhurst, agreeing with his neighbor that she is spouting treason (65-66). The women of both sides, England and Germany, trade the same propaganda as the latest gossip in their respective languages (68). The working girls in the war factories admire the wages pulled in by the girls in munitions, exclaiming "That's where the money is!" (83). In one of the more

controversial moments of the show, organized religion is also exposed as a complicit player in the war machine. An Anglican chaplain prays during the field service before an attack:

The Archbishop of Canterbury has made it known that it is no sin to labour for the war on the Sabbath. I am sure you would like to know that the Chief Rabbi has absolved your Jewish brethren from abstaining from pork in the trenches. And likewise his Holiness the Pope has ruled that the eating of flesh on a Friday no longer a venial sin...And in far-away Tibet, the Dalai Lama has placed his prayers at the disposal of the Allies. Now, brethren, tomorrow being Good Friday, we hope God will look kindly on our attack on Arras. (75-76)

The service is then continued with tradition Anglican hymns, “The Church’s One Foundation” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”—sung, however, with the soldiers’ own decidedly satirical lyrics (i.e., “Joe Karno’s Army” and “When This Lousy War is Over”).

When considering then the reception history of *Oh What a Lovely War*, it is remarkable that even Bernard Levin of the conservative *Daily Mail*, in his review of the original show at Stratford East, appreciated the satire, writing that “in truth, Miss Littlewood’s touch is light, and the humour is uppermost, even in the savage parody of a field service.”⁴⁶⁰ However, in his initial review of the Stratford East production for the *Sunday Times*, critic Harold Hobson, although he enjoyed the piece overall, took issue with what he perceived as a cumulative and exaggerated attack on any representative of authority. The emphasis on working-class victimization was a detriment to the dialectical potential of the show, for it offered a resolution to the historical narrative, namely an affective closure of anger, grief and pride. An example of this reaction is described by Littlewood herself in her autobiography, who (apparently uncritically) recalls that the show “awakened race memory [sic] in our audiences. At the end of each performance people would come on stage bringing

⁴⁶⁰ Levin, Review of *Oh What a Lovely War* (*The Daily Mail*), in *Postwar Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 111-113.

memories and mementoes, even lines of dialogue which sometimes turned up in the show.”⁴⁶¹

When the company prepared to transfer the production from Stratford East to the West End in June of 1963, however, significant adjustments had to be made. The West End for-profit management at Wyndham’s Theatre insisted that the audience go out in a “lighter vein.”⁴⁶² The transfer necessitated a re-evaluation of the direct political commentary inherent in the work, so the piece was edited to smooth out—and in some cases, eliminate—the overtly Marxist dialogues; for example, a lot of detailed documentation was trimmed from the “War Profiteers” scene to make it faster and livelier. There is no available script from the original Stratford East production; the revised play-script published by Methuen in 2000 was assembled by Littlewood in an attempt “to restore the life of the play to my memory of the first production at Stratford East in 1963.”⁴⁶³ However, there are noticeable changes in the published script from the first-hand accounts of the original production. In an invaluable assessment of the “Ur-texts” for the show, Derek Paget (who had access to an audio recording of the Stratford East production and to Methuen’s original files for the publication) reveals the original ending of the show: instead of ending with a reprise of “Oh What a Lovely War,” Victor Spinetti made the following curtain speech after the song “And When They Ask Us”:

Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of the Merry Roosters, or Pierrot company, thank you for being such a marvelous audience. Please tell your friends that the War Game, which is invariably mounted regardless of cost, is continuous. *[There are appreciative murmurs of laughter from the audience at this point.(DP)]* Any number can play. See you in the penalty area. Goodnight!⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*. 693.

⁴⁶² Ibid. 259.

⁴⁶³ Littlewood, “Introduction,” in *Oh What a Lovely War*, Theatre Workshop, xi.

⁴⁶⁴ Paget, “*Oh What a Lovely War*: the Texts and Their Context,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, (August 1990), 259.

The West End show concluded quite differently, with the full cast singing a reprise of the second-act opener, “Oh What a Lovely War,” while a slide show of documentary photographs of the front lines and the wounded ran on the screen behind.

The change was a definite adjustment in tone and message, a shift from direct political lesson to a reinforcement of the comic-ironic mode. Company member Frances Cuka, who was not in the production, later recalled that with the original ending, “you were left crying your heart out,” whereas after the transfer it was “[a]ll frightfully hearty and calculated to send the audience home happy.”⁴⁶⁵ Brian Murphy, an original cast member, declared, “I still believe that it was only the first few audiences that got the full smack of *Lovely War*” in a later interview with a production historian.⁴⁶⁶ However, the tension between the West End contingencies and the Theatre Workshop’s original intent was, in my assessment, a fruitful one that resulted in a stream-lined show with an increased dialectical form. The comic juxtaposition of narrative elements (dialogue, statistics, songs, and photography) is the key to the critical power of the piece. The original anti-war satire had too many black-and-white moments that offered a too-simple solution. It is not enough to blame the ruling classes for militarism and celebrate the working classes, for this hands audience members an easy answer: they can “cry their hearts out” about it and then cathartically move on. The first step towards social subversion is to entertain the audience—and to bring them in, literally and figuratively. *The Financial Times* criticized the surplus of “doctrinaire propaganda” in the Stratford East production, specifically condemning the original version of the War Profiteers scene, which included an extended dialogue describing the poisoned-shell artillery advertised in *American Machinist* in 1915. While a grisly and compelling read in dialogue form, it is conjecturable that the

⁴⁶⁵ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 127.

⁴⁶⁶ Paget, “Texts and Their Contexts,” 244.

unabridged one-and-a-half minute dialogue was, as Paget suggests, “dramatically inert.”⁴⁶⁷ The description of the effects of poisoned shrapnel are still included in the revised scene, but in a much faster-moving dialogue that establishes the point: complete free-market business entrepreneurship spurred bigger and better mechanisms. Rather than a citation, the scene becomes an echo of Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, in which the characters are unilaterally seduced by the promise of deadly and profitable innovation.

Thus (in a metatheatrical irony), I argue that the commercial version of *Oh What Lovely War* came closer to realizing the monumental importance of Brecht’s theatre theory, that is, drama that is not the source of commentary, but rather a location that sets something in motion, that carves out a space for critical development which, hopefully, will lead to political engagement outside the theatre. In this way, the comic irony of the show, the Brechtian “joke of contradictions,” is not just a dialectic of political ideology, but also a dialectic of formal mode that effects a dialogue with the audience. In his second review of the piece, upon its West End opening, Harold Hobson singled out the carefully contradictory tone and content that bind the piece into cohesion:

The presentation of the battles and slaughter of 1914-1918 in the guise of a pierrot entertainment is one of an irony not matched anywhere else in the London theatre. Miraculously, the precisely judged casualness of this conception rises unfalteringly to the height of its great argument.⁴⁶⁸

While some members of the company may have felt that the “smack” was taken out of the show, the evidence suggests that the revisions made for the commercial production smoothed down the broad polemical aspects into a more slippery and more subversive attack on a society that rationalizes war via sentiment. When the well-known songs

⁴⁶⁷ Paget, “Texts and Their Contexts,” 257.

⁴⁶⁸ Harold Hobson, Review of *Oh What a Lovely War* (*The Sunday Times*, July 11, 1963), in *Postwar Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 114.

were sung over a barrage of brutal images and ever-increasing carnage, the audience was encouraged to feel righteous anger through the disturbing sense of nostalgic pleasure.

As mentioned earlier, Littlewood and other company members began the project with a strong vehemence against any nostalgic sentimentalizing of World War I. The use of music in the show was particularly important in its emotional impact, and there is evidence that for some spectators, the aesthetic memory triggered by the recognizable songs did, in fact, result in personal nostalgia rather than critical reflection. Despite Littlewood's gargantuan battles with Charles Chilton to avoid any glossy, emotional renditions of the songs, the music was capable of evoking personal memory. Company member Avis Bunnage recalled that "we'd see people walking out, and I remember at the end of one matinee a man crying his heart out, but that was the effect of the songs on the individual," providing us with a glimpse into the wide spectrum of audience response.⁴⁶⁹ One reviewer, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, shared that "[t]o hear the songs we sang—even though the younger generation doesn't always know how to sing them—is to catch again a whiff of that wry, disillusioned, humorous resignation with which our armies faced trench life."⁴⁷⁰ It is amusing to note, though, the reviewer's complaint that the younger generation doesn't know how to sing the songs.

This reaction reveals the historical function of what Pierre Nora has called "*lieux de memoire*," which "mark the rituals of a society without ritual...maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal."⁴⁷¹ Through this process, the 'will to remember' transforms songs—and not

⁴⁶⁹ Quoted in Coren, *Theatre Royal: 100 Years of Stratford East*, 47.

⁴⁷⁰ W.A. Darlington, Review of *Oh What a Lovely War* (*Daily Telegraph*, June 21, 1963), in *Postwar Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 115.

⁴⁷¹ Nora, "Between Memory and History" *Representations* (Spring 1989), 12.

only songs, but also narratives such as the 1914 Christmas truce—into an embodied form of history, a historiography of communal ritual. The evocation of these mythological histories is subsequently complicated by, to reference Rokem again, the “hyper-historicity” of the actor and the site of performance. The mythological structure of *lieux de memoire* thus intersects with its re-embodiment in Theatre Workshop’s creation, eliciting what I am calling a dialogue between nostalgia and satire. This dialogue is characterized by what Linda Hutcheon has described as the “transideological politics of irony”: since irony is itself a process of intention and interpretation within a discursive community, this process is by its very nature equivocal in its ideological identity. As Hutcheon writes, “while irony can be used to reinforce authority, it can also be used to oppositional and subversive ends—and it can become suspect for that very reason.”⁴⁷² An ironic historiography engages with both the normative politics of authority and with the transgressive. The dialogic nature of *Oh What a Lovely War*’s historiography, not surprisingly, disturbed both the conservative (the audience walking out), and the radical.

Indeed, the most venomous attack on the show came from political activist and folk singer Ewan MacColl, one of the original founders of Theatre Workshop, who had left the company when it settled in London and stopped touring working-class towns. MacColl felt that the entire production was a betrayal of Theatre Workshop’s original mission to make theatre for the working classes, declaring that “Here was a show, *Oh What a Lovely War*, which was ostensibly an anti-war show. Yet it was running in the West End...I maintain that a theatre which sets out to deal with a social and human problem like war and which leaves the audience feeling nice and comfy, in a rosy glow of nostalgia, is not doing its job, it has failed.”⁴⁷³ The judgment that the

⁴⁷² Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 29.

⁴⁷³ MacColl cited in Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 128.

company was “selling-out,” however, assumes a universal reaction based on class position. MacColl’s position romanticizes history by sentimentalizing working-class victimization, a position which limits a contemporary dialogue. In my assessment, it is the “slicker,” more comedically ironic, commercially-friendly West End version of the show that came closer to achieving a truly dialectical popular theatre event, reflecting Brecht’s theory of a performance that shows “every manifold, complicated, contradictory relationship between the individual and society.”⁴⁷⁴ The sharp satirical message was still memorable after the enjoyment of spectacle and song, and the removal of polemic resulted in a more open, *playful* approach to socio-political criticism.

1964: Oh What a Lovely War on Broadway

As the previous chapter demonstrated, by 1964 the Broadway theatre-going audience was familiar with “Brecht” as part of a general theatre vocabulary, although the critical maneuvers of historical dialectics were obscured in the efforts to mold Brecht into either a secular-humanist or a Communist-ideologue. Despite any American skepticism of overtly Marxist messages and of Brechtian texts, or perhaps because of it, *Oh What a Lovely War* was an important moment for political satire on the commercial stage in the early 1960’s. Broadway hosted a genuinely Brechtian, didactic comedy, in a British-birthed hybrid of an American staple (the musical). Certainly, the show did not run as long in New York as it did in London, and it is not revived with nearly the same regularity in this country as it is in Britain and the Commonwealth countries, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The simple fact that Americans did (and do) not have nearly as much of a sense of World War I as a monumental national event undoubtedly is a key factor to its reception as a quality British commercial import rather than a blockbuster (compared with another

⁴⁷⁴ Brecht, “Notizen über die Dialektik auf dem Theater,” in *Schriften zum Theater II*, 922.

contemporary British musical, *Oliver!*, in 1961). The Broadway production played in the Broadhurst theatre for three and a half months (125 performances) a respectable length for a specifically British import, and equal to the Broadway run for the previous Theatre Workshop transfer, Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* in 1960-1961. While Theatre Workshop's *Oh What a Lovely War* had a subversive effect in England because of its approach to British history, it took up a subversive position on Broadway as well. It played to and challenged both Left-sympathizers (accustomed to psychologically-based liberal realism) and the more conservative appreciators of spectacle and nostalgic entertainment, two chief receptive patterns astutely analyzed by American theatre historian Bruce McConachie as part of the mainstream "theater of containment liberalism."⁴⁷⁵ While the show is, as Paget remarks, "an excellent primary source for (Britain in) the 1960's...[as] part of the Alternative Voice which reshaped British society in the 1960s and 1970s,"⁴⁷⁶ it was also a key moment for the Broadway theatre of the early and mid-1960's. Successfully offering the New York audience a British musical with "authentically" English dialects and music-hall songs, the piece continually undercuts its own tendencies towards nostalgic patriotism. *OWLW* challenges contemporary values systems by actively confronting the audience with their own perceptions of history *and* spectacle, an additional connection between the work of Theatre Workshop and the theoretical legacy of Brecht.

As described in chapter 2, Elizabeth Wright postulates that for Brecht, the Other involved in the production of a text's meaning is always History. The history of Britain's involvement in World War I is torn apart, studied, and juggled in *Oh What a Lovely War*. The dialectic treatment of history, however, places human actions in their historical contingencies, and the benefit of Brechtian estrangement is that it

⁴⁷⁵ McConachie, *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War*, 50-55.

⁴⁷⁶ Paget, "Popularising popular history," 119.

discourages us from psychologically rationalizing the characters' actions, but rather forces us to think about the *dialectic* of history, the open dialectic that is never neatly wrapped up into a synthesizing solution. "Mockingly ironic, magnetically fascinating, 'Lovely War' defies a playgoer to settle back in his seat," wrote the critic for *TIME* magazine.⁴⁷⁷ The chilling ambivalence towards military gallantry and patriotic resolve expressed in *Oh What a Lovely War* was not lost on the American audience, despite its more distant historical context. Cast member Murray Melvin provides an invaluable first-hand memory of the Broadway performance:

By the time we got to New York the Vietnam war had begun and victory fever had set in. People walked out in groups during the show. I remember those marvelous Quakers who kept up a twenty-four hour vigil in Times Square against the war. They were beaten, spat upon and abused. We gave them free tickets, and they'd come back at the end to our dressing-rooms with tears in their eyes, thanking us for coming to America.⁴⁷⁸

Oh What a Lovely War successfully challenged New York's audiences as well as London's despite the lesser significance of World War I in the audience's national history. The Brechtian techniques of Theatre Workshop made an entertainment out of an *attack* on history: the presentation of clowns and songs played around with both war and history as sources of national myth. While I would most certainly not characterize the show as camp, the aesthetic mechanisms of *Oh What a Lovely War* are reminiscent of Susan Sontag's assessment of the importance of nostalgia in the development of the camp aesthetic and the "New Sensibility" of the decade.⁴⁷⁹ The piece is both fun and threatening, exposing national mythologies as part of

⁴⁷⁷ *TIME* magazine, "Laughter in Hell," October 9, 1964.

⁴⁷⁸ Coren, *Theatre Royal*, 46. Quoted from a personal interview with the author.

⁴⁷⁹ Sontag suggests that the "New Sensibility" is one of "fun and wit and nostalgia. It is also extremely history-conscious." ("One Culture and the New Sensibility," in *Against Interpretation*, 304). Sontag theorizes Camp as a love for the theatrical and a hyper-awareness of Being-as-Playing-a-Role, of a loving exaggeration of the ridiculously serious. This aesthetic is a keen theorization of Littlewood's approach to World War I, suitable for re-enactment only by a pierrot troupe: "war is only for clowns," as she told Raffles.

dangerously ridiculous ideologies. The tough, honest foot soldier—the “lions led by donkeys,” as immortalized in British history—was also revealed as a sheep led to factory-line slaughter, supported and encouraged by his working-class family on the home-front. This comprehensive indictment of cultures of war and the historical consciousness that perpetuates it evidently resonated with the 1964-1965 American audience. The playful attack on historical perpetuity threatened the growing awareness of a new combat franchise.

Conclusion

Running in New York at the Broadhurst from September 30, 1964 through January 16, 1965, *OWLW* was the runner-up for the Drama Critics’ Circle award for Best Musical, garnering four votes, an impressive credential considering that the show opened in the same season as *Fiddler On the Roof*.⁴⁸⁰ Theatre Workshop itself exhibited an awareness of the ironies of a successful Brechtian musical entertainment. Paget documents an ad-lib made by Victor Spinetti at the top of the second act during the Stratford East run, captured on the audio recording. “No, no, mustn’t laugh at that!” Spinetti cried, after a joke about the 1916 Military Service Act (the “Conscription Act”); “We’ll never get a West End transfer, I can tell you!”⁴⁸¹ While Paget reads this seriously against the adjustments made to the subsequent agit-prop “War Profiteers” scene, I believe it must be read as ironic self-reflexivity. The company’s reliance upon West End transfers for financial support of Theatre Workshop’s developmental practice was already ruefully acknowledged by all involved (indeed, the company members were accustomed to shuffling around players upon production transfers.) The Conscription Act joke, unlike the overt agit-prop of

⁴⁸⁰ Guernsey, Jr., *The Burns and Mantle Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1964-1965*.

⁴⁸¹ Quoted in Paget, “Texts and Their Context,” 258. The joke, in fact, remained in the show, after the top-of-the-second-act opener “Oh What a Lovely War”: “Ladies and Gentleman,” Spinetti as the M.C. announces: “when the Conscription Act was passed, 51,000 able-bodied men left home without leaving any forwarding addresses,” upon which the ladies cry “Shame!” (*OWLW* 40).

the original War Profiteers and German Officer scenes, was played as music-hall banter. This serendipitously recorded ad-lib hints at a more complex relationship between the company and their subversive project. Abjuring the audience from laughing at a cheesy joke about conscription (quite similar to those made in *The Recruiting Officer*) allows the players to invite the spectators into their world of transgression, but on safe and monitored terms. In this light, the warning is more of a pledge of false security, indicating that a dig at the draft is as political as it gets. However, the subsequent critiques embedded in the second act of the show are far more complex in their indictment not only of military and political operations but of the collusion of historical tradition in general. Joking with the audience foregrounds the theatrical contingencies of spectatorial actuality, but also impels a sense of solidarity between the audience and the players. This playful, yet unresolved, consideration of the very operations of the theatre is yet one more instance of this production's Brechtian (and comic) sensibility, revealing a consciousness of working within the apparatus.

Theatre Workshop's success on the West End and then transfer to Broadway is an exciting example of Brecht's theory of dialectical comedy that married socio-political critique with spectacle on the mainstream stage. Activist and one-time Theatre Workshop leader Ewan MacColl's attack on *Oh What Lovely War* reveals the critical dead-end that occurs when performance is determined by polemics rather than the cultural structures of entertainment at hand: "Theatre, when it is dealing with social issues, should hurt; you should leave the theatre feeling furious." The cold, hard fact that the theatre operates in a separate sphere than political praxis, however, ensures that righteous anger fueled in the theatre will soon die out to, at best, a few smoking embers. As Mother Courage points out to the angry young soldier, before launching into the Song of the Great Capitulation, "I'm only saying, your rage isn't

long enough, you won't be able to deliver on it. Pity...See what I was saying? He's already sitting back down. Yep, they know us through and through and they know how they have to operate.”⁴⁸² The strategy of the comic dialectic theatre is to spark a critical awareness in the spectator leaving the theatre without knowing exactly what to think, and feeling uncomfortable about that: what are the fundamental practices underlying the comic irony, we might ask after laughing at *Beyond the Fringe* or *Oh What a Lovely War*. These successful comedies served to carve out a space for critical reflection of contemporary political hegemonies through their confrontations with historical thinking and their manipulation of nostalgia into satire. *Oh What a Lovely War*, in particular, expanded the genre of the “Great War play” by not only putting the war itself under the microscope, but by then opening up the way that war becomes part of an ideologically-driven historical narrative. This is why I find the second, more ambivalent, “commercial” version to be, ultimately, more subversive: it puts the “Lions Led by Donkeys” historical myth into narrative quotes as well.

Martin Esslin contributed an article entitled “Brecht and the English Theatre” to the *Tulane Drama Review* in 1966, in which he assesses the foregoing ten years of Brecht's influence on English theatre practitioners. Esslin continues to celebrate Brecht primarily as a dramatic poet, and yet again implies that Brecht's Marxist impetus relies upon a specific articulation of class struggle rather than a more complex Marxist consideration of the economic foundations of history and social ideologies. The essay is telling as a critical history of 10 years of Brechtian influence among the main players in English drama, however, and the English drama was a significant influence on the American stage as part of the process of commercial exchange across the Atlantic. Interestingly, Esslin's critique of William Gaskill's 1965 production of

⁴⁸² Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, 56. („Ich sag nur, Ihre Wut ist nicht lang genug, mit der können Sie nix ausrichten, schad...Sehn Sie, was hab ich gesagt. Sie sitzen schon. Ja, die kennen sich aus in uns und wissen, wie sies machen müssen.“)

Mother Courage at the National Theatre echoes the problems evident in the Broadway production of 1963: “photographically copied” from the Berliner Ensemble’s production, the cast played out a dour Marxist anti-war message in a mechanically estranged fashion, proscribing the vibrant, filthy humanity of this fable of contradictions. Esslin acknowledges Gaskill’s *Recruiting Officer*, however, as “the most successful Brechtian production of the period,” and continues on to laud Joan Littlewood and Peter Brook, whose work “must, on the whole, be regarded as the most positive result of Brechtian influence on the art of stage directing in England.”⁴⁸³ The two early 1960s productions presented in this chapter are felicitous examples of how a Brechtian execution of historical dialectics and the transgressive power of comedy manifested successfully in the mainstream Anglo-American theatre at this moment. Esslin’s inclusion of Peter Brook opens the door to the most challenging provocation of the mainstream theatre apparatus of this time. As the concluding chapter will demonstrate, with his 1964 production of Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*, Brook harnessed Brecht’s principle of critical comedy with Artaud’s exhortation to Nietzschean eternal play, broadening the critical evocations of a comic-dialectical approach to history.

⁴⁸³ Esslin, “Brecht and the English Theatre,” *Tulane Drama Review* (Winter 1966), 66.

CHAPTER 5

MARAT/SADE: THE MAD GRIN OF HISTORY

Introduction

To trace the vectors of history in Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* is to draw an Escher-like image. Written by the German-born Swedish citizen in 1963, the play was first produced in West Berlin in April 1964, and the first English-language production followed shortly thereupon, opening in August 1964 at the Aldwych Theatre in London, a Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Peter Brook. In the Introduction to the printed edition of the English version of the play (translated by Geoffrey Skelton and adapted into verse by Adrian Mitchell for the Brook production), Brook notes that "one of the London critics attacked the play on the ground that it was a fashionable mixture of all the best theatrical ingredients around—Brechtian—didactic—absurdist—Theatre of Cruelty. He said this to disparage but I repeat this as praise."⁴⁸⁴ As the previous two chapters have demonstrated, the discourse of the avant-garde was by 1964 so incorporated into the mainstream critical vocabulary that such a production was, incredibly, open to charges of trendiness.

The dynamics of the Brechtian dialectic and the Artaudian aesthetic shock are, however, too unique to be curtly summarized, and the political and historical signifiers of play are so intricately interwoven as to warrant a close analysis as to how the Brechtian and Artaudian influences color the same moment in different ways. The Brechtian schema hinges upon his insistence that the theatre work be specific to its own historical context, within a particular theatre apparatus and process of spectatorship. The Peter Brook-Royal Shakespeare Company production of

⁴⁸⁴ Brook, "Introduction," in *The Marat/ Sade*, vi.

Marat/Sade, like Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop's *Oh What Lovely War*, is an intervention in historiography, foregrounding the systems of power and knowledge behind the perpetuation of national and universal histories. The political and intellectual power of the piece is amplified by challenges to rational Enlightenment discourse, through performances that destabilize the principles of free speech and democratic rule.

Brook's *Marat/Sade* differed from *Oh What a Lovely War*, however, in its Artaudian impetus. The production was part of a "Theatre of Cruelty" season, in fact, inspired by Brook's workshops with the company in which they explored the possibilities of a physical, visceral, phenomenological experience in the theatre. Thus the shared Artaudian aesthetics of non-verbal affect was put into dialogue with a Brechtian dialectic of reason and human action inherent in Weiss's drama. In this chapter I am arguing that this production is an important moment in the development of a mainstream, postmodern, Anglo-American Brechtian theatre because of its irresolvable tensions of aesthetic intention and political statement. The larger discourse of post-Brechtian drama is largely characterized by, as Stanton B. Garner, Jr. has pointed out, an "almost obsessive interest in the body as a political unit, its function within the play of political forces, and its role within the contest of subjectivity and subjection."⁴⁸⁵ Marvin Carlson has also noted the important locus of the body as receptacle and symptom of desire that de-stabilizes the scientific discourse of social and political development.⁴⁸⁶ In building on these excellent studies, I am interested in how the phenomenology of the material body in the performance of the play intersected with the comic elements of the Brechtian dialectical theatre inherent in Weiss's drama, leading to an often overlooked tonality of dark comedy. Brook's

⁴⁸⁵ Garner, Jr., "Post-Brechtian Anatomies," *Theatre Journal*, (May 1990), 146.

⁴⁸⁶ Carlson, "Body and Sign in *Marat/Sade*," *Assaph* (1999).

focus on the pure physicality of “Cruelty” meant that so strong was “materiality and presence privileged over referentiality and the symbolic that the production...seemed to toy with the possibility of losing referential control altogether, and becoming pure presence,” as Carlson writes.⁴⁸⁷ As we saw in chapter one, the early critical moves towards a postmodern paradigm—especially the work of Jacques Derrida—centered on this concept of “pure presence” that obviates rationality, the Dionysian as conjured by Artaud, and of course Derrida turned to Artaud specifically to speculate the possibilities of expression that subverts the *différance* of speech. Weiss’s drama is a political interrogation of the legacies of Enlightenment rationality, however, a verbal dialectic that was then set to work within the Artaudian forces of “pure presence.” The tension between the two discourses—the dialectic and the pure presence, the word and the body—resulted in a direct engagement between the political and the aesthetic, making *Marat/Sade*, as David Roberts has argued, “the paradigmatic work of the post-avantgarde (which can be assimilated in neither Adorno’s nor Lukács’s aesthetics) in that it poses the central question of the *function* of art in bourgeois society since the French Revolution and the possibility of the self-transcendence of art.”⁴⁸⁸

Thus in this final chapter I examine *Marat/Sade* as a prime example of the postmodern re-invention of the heritage of the historical avant-garde, focusing specifically on the Brook production as an indicator of this shift in the Anglo-American theatre which is the focus of this study. A critical emphasis upon the production’s relationship to the “Theatre of Cruelty” and the aesthetics of embodiment runs the risk of overlooking the significance of the production as a political dialogue within the commercial theatre realm: in this I am in agreement with John McKenzie when he writes that “[o]nly by wilfully ignoring the clear intention of the dialogue and

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁸⁸ Roberts, “Marat/Sade, or the Birth of Postmodernism from the Spirit of the Avantgarde Author(s),” *New German Critique* (Spring-Summer 1986), 118.

by dismissing Weiss's comments could one conclude that *Marat-Sade* was anything other than a play whose concern was first and foremost political."⁴⁸⁹ The political message of the play (in this incarnation⁴⁹⁰) was Brechtian in its refusal to present a clear resolution to social and political struggle; moreover, the direct, visceral effect of political struggle made the aesthetic power of the piece also a political commentary. David Roberts aptly concludes that "the 'subject' of the play is unfinished history."⁴⁹¹ Like *Oh What a Lovely War* and *Beyond the Fringe*, *Marat/Sade* harnessed new theatrical forms to engage the audience in historical, social, and political dialogue. The profound shock of material body in all of its "Cruelty" distinguishes the subtler comic elements of *Marat/Sade*, however, from those of the former two productions. In fact, one of the most interesting tensions of the production is that between the interrogation of history, which operates as a Brechtian comic dialectic, and the performative nature of rational discourse, effected through an Artaudian physicality. In this duality of text and body, of a conceptual dialectic and of pure presence, the production opened up new theatrical possibilities for a postmodern, post-avantgarde performance that encouraged political engagement through its reiteration of the *unfinished-ness* of the revolutionary goal of global human equality.

Politics, History, and the Brechtian Dialectic

The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade (the English translation of the original title, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean-Paul Marats dargestellt durch die Schauspielgruppe des Hospizes zu Charenton unter Anleitung des Herrn de Sade*) is Brechtian in its structure as a series of distinct scenes,

⁴⁸⁹ McKenzie, "Peter Weiss and the Politics of 'Marat-Sade,'" *New Theatre Quarterly* (1985), 312.

⁴⁹⁰ Choices made specific to each production profoundly impacted the political significance of Weiss's drama, as I shall explain below.

⁴⁹¹ Roberts, 129.

which are descriptively entitled and announced by a Herald. The piece requires all of the players to be onstage throughout and incorporates music, pantomime, and commentary to the audience, with a mixture of song, dialogue, and a rigorous system of *agon*, between de Sade and the patient/actor who embodies “Marat.” The playing arena is the theatre itself, for the audience of *Marat/Sade* is acknowledged as the audience of the play-within-the-play. The drama strays from strictly Brechtian form in its discrete unity of time and place: while episodic, the drama nevertheless plays out in “real time.” The conceit of the play is based on historical fact and on Shakespearean dogma: all the world’s a stage, and the Marquis de Sade took advantage of this truism by writing plays for (his fellow) patients of the Charenton asylum to perform for a select audience. This documented historical occurrence is already ripe for an accompanying Shakespearean analogy: the famous “all the world’s a stage” soliloquy was, of course, delivered by a melancholic, the dismal lord Jaques, whose by-turn exuberance and depression render him one of the more bipolar characters in the Shakespearean pantheon. The structural narrative of *Marat/Sade* and the play-within-the-play together underscore the relationship between the mutable markers of sanity and the performative nature of social normativity, all in the service of an irresolvable interrogation into the nature of politics and ethics.

De Sade’s play-within-a-play, taking place in a Napoleonic asylum for the mentally ill (and socially unacceptable⁴⁹²), and Weiss’s encompassing multiple narratives also resonate with various historical periods. Una Chaudhuri, for instance, has argued that the drama provokes a dialogue about “the representation and reading of history, and the motives of those who are performing the reading.”⁴⁹³ The history

⁴⁹² The (in)sanity of the inmates of the asylum of Charenton is one of the many variables open to interpretation on the part of the play’s director. Brook made the decision that the asylum inmates were, indeed, patients with severe mental, psychological, and in some cases physical disabilities.

⁴⁹³ Chaudhuri, “*Marat/Sade* and the politics of interpretation,” in *Reading Plays: interpretation and reception*, eds. Scolnicov & Holland, 221.

that is reenacted before us, “for your delectation and the patients’ rehabilitation,” as the asylum director Monsieur Coulmier puts it, is the drama of the French Revolution, specifically the death of Jacobin leader Jean-Paul Marat at the hand of a young Girondin-sympathizing girl from the northern city of Caen, Charlotte Corday. Marat, with Robespierre, was one of the key leaders of the Jacobins who masterminded the overthrow of the French monarchy, the rule of the various successive Assemblies and then the National Convention, and the martial law of the Committee for Public Safety from 1793 through 1794. Marat was murdered in the summer of 1793, becoming a martyr for the Jacobin cause, which disintegrated through its own violence and financial mismanagement the following year, and Robespierre himself was guillotined in the summer of 1794. By the year 1808, the time of the theatrical presentation in which we are participating, France was once more under monarchical rule, this time with the Emperor Napoleon, whose empire restored a dictatorship but also encouraged the economic growth of the bourgeoisie, which had taken advantage of the opportunities for trade and investment during the wars and upheaval of the Revolution. Thus the *agon* of the play is not only between de Sade’s and Marat’s philosophical approaches to human nature and ethics, but also between the flawed political ideals of the Revolution and the flawed “perfection” of the contemporaneous moment, expressed by Coulmier. Making the historical context for the philosophical-political debate even more complex is Weiss’s interpolation of a twentieth-century political Marxist discourse. As John McKenzie has demonstrated, *Marat/Sade* is in one respect a document of Weiss’s attempt to work out his own stance towards Marxism, and the version produced in London in 1964 represents a “‘third standpoint’—the stance of a would-be social reformer who can find no satisfactory political means for effecting social reform.”⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹⁴ McKenzie, “Peter Weiss and the Politics of ‘Marat/Sade,’” 304.

This leads us to the political contradictions inherent in the drama's arguments. The three initial productions of the play, in fact—in West Berlin (1964), London (1964), and Rostock, GDR (1965)—each settled on a different lesson. The West Berlin production, directed by Konrad Swinarski, emphasized the game-like nature of the debate between Marat and de Sade, reflecting a sad, thoughtful de Sade and a suffering, fanatical Marat, according to Darko Suvin in a comparative study of the three productions.⁴⁹⁵ The East German production the following year, however, was markedly different in design, characterization, and even text. Director Hanns Anselm Perten and his designers created an asylum of political prisoners and emphasized the word over physical performances. The Herald and the Four Singers were no longer clowns but rather rational proponents of political resistance. Marat was a passionate representative of a Marxist revolution, a victim of the bourgeois counter-revolution represented by Coulmier and de Sade himself, a position effected by extensive cuts and revisions to sections of the play, as Weiss himself admitted in an interview.⁴⁹⁶ “Marat therefore turned out to be the moral victor, though at the price of reducing the dialogue to a series of monologues,” Suvin concludes.⁴⁹⁷ Weiss was present during the rehearsal process, and by analyzing the extensive interviews he participated in during all three productions, McKenzie argues that “the progress of the play through its various productions, each stressing different aspects of the work, is paralleled by a marked development in Weiss's attitudes, political, dramatic, and aesthetic.”⁴⁹⁸ By 1965, Weiss had decided in favor of a firm commitment to Marxism, as reflected in his multiple interviews with the East German press. Yet as an artist, he demonstrated

⁴⁹⁵ Suvin, “Weiss's *Marat/Sade* and its Three Main Performance Versions,” *Modern Drama*, (Sept. 1988), 403.

⁴⁹⁶ Wilhelm Girnus and Werner Mittenzwei, Interview with Peter Weiss in *Sinn und Form* (1965). As translated and quoted in McKenzie, “Peter Weiss and the Politics of ‘Marat/Sade,’” 310.

⁴⁹⁷ Suvin, “Weiss's *Marat/Sade*,” 408.

⁴⁹⁸ McKenzie, “Peter Weiss and the Politics of ‘Marat/Sade,’” 302.

a sensitivity to the different worlds in which his drama could survive. In an interview with Michael Roloff recorded in March 1964, Weiss specifically contemplated the viability of *Marat/Sade* in the West:

For a director in a Western society—in which, on the whole, the concept of class struggle is viewed as no longer having any bearing on reality, and in which, in all artistic endeavour, the belief flourishes that our problems are insoluble anyway and that everything is basically absurd and mad—it will be almost natural to let the madhouse atmosphere in *Marat/Sade* predominate.⁴⁹⁹

Likewise, Weiss acknowledged in interviews with East German publications *Neue Kritik* and *Sinn und Form* that the only way the drama was producible in the GDR is if Marat becomes a positive hero of the revolution; “I know there has been much discussion about the apparent impossibility of staging the play and about the presence of too many counter-revolutionary ideas in the figure of de Sade,” he said to interviewers Wilhelm Girnus and Werner Mittenzwei.⁵⁰⁰ While Weiss’s complex investment in the political and historical stakes of being a writer-artist is not the focus of this study, it is important to note the powerful possibilities inherent in the political dialogue of the drama.

In order to unpack the political positions brought into debate, let us first consider de Sade’s principles, which for the twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century viewer/reader might resonate as a philosophical ancestor of Nietzschean will-to-power. De Sade honors only the limits of human sensation, and his lament concerns a world in which human action, once cruel and ecstatic, becomes machine-like and removed from sensual cognition; for de Sade, the ultimate power of moral judgment lies in the individual’s capacity for aesthetic sensation. De Sade’s project of extreme sexual and painful depravity was, in his estimation, a process of humanism: “In a

⁴⁹⁹ As cited in McKenzie, 308.

⁵⁰⁰ As translated and quoted in McKenzie, 310.

criminal society/ I dug the criminal out of myself/ so I could understand him and so understand/ the times we live in” (47). The true failure of the Revolution, from de Sade’s point of view, is the failure of its extreme acts to awaken a sense of individual agency. The violences of the Revolutionaries, like those of the vanquished *ancien régime*, were committed in the interests of a collective, without appreciation of the individual capacity for pain and action, and turned a passionate impetus into something mechanical and technocratic, into “the withering of the individual man/ and a slow merging into uniformity/ to the death of choice/ to self-denial” (49). The moral of de Sade’s story, he tells Marat near the end, is that “these cells of the inner self/ are worse than the deepest stone dungeon/ and as long as they are locked/ all your revolution remains/ only a prison mutiny/ to be put down/ by corrupted fellow-prisoners” (93). At this point, after having seen the player-patients get more and more restless throughout their dramatic reenactment, de Sade’s lesson becomes a general pronouncement on history. Mankind continually suppresses its own agency in its attempt to create a collective history—and this mass-thought has the disturbing potential to become self-denying, mechanical, mass violence. Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobins, believed that to “restore their sovereignty to the people was to inaugurate the reign of virtue;” and yet, “while the people in normal times rule by virtue, in times of revolution to virtue must be added terror.”⁵⁰¹ This is, of course, one of the great unresolved ironies of the French Revolution, and the reason why it remains as a lodestone for political philosophers, from Burke in the eighteenth-century and Marx in the nineteenth- through to Foucault in the twentieth-century.

Marat’s critical position is that of a failed liberal-political philosopher, whose faith in the humanistic power of collective democratic action has been shattered by the corruption of power. If de Sade’s viewpoint is “yet again,” Marat’s is “if only”; for de

⁵⁰¹ Cobban, *A History of Modern France, Volume One: 1715-1799*, 233-234.

Sade's "Marat," the Idea of the Revolution remains, despite the failures of the revolutionaries. Ghost-like, he laments the proceedings that have ensued after his death, for "the counter-revolution has started a new civil war/ and what are we doing/ The farms we confiscated from the churches have so far produced nothing/ to feed the dispossessed" (76). The patient who plays Marat is introduced as "a lucky paranoiac" (6), and thus the posthumous laments of a proto-socialist prophet are doubly-marked with the label of paranoia. The "paranoid" accusations are also the self-justifications of a political martyr, who insists from his coffin-like tub that from "the vast indifference I invent a meaning/ I don't watch unmoved I intervene/ and say that this and this are wrong/ and I work to alter them and improve them" (26). Is not the violence committed in the name of the people justified by the people's own welfare? Is not every argument against Marat's Revolution countered by the fact that its true, ideal potential was extinguished with his death? Marat's desperation to justify the principles of the Revolution after proof of its violence (and its ultimate failure) resonates (anachronistically) as a twentieth-century attempt to revise and justify Marxism in the wake of Stalinism and Cold War hegemonies. In his fantasized speech to the National Assembly, Marat even accuses his revolutionary peers of reifying the proletariat, a key revisionary critique among 20th century Marxist theorists: "You'll never stop talking of the people/ as a rough and formless mass," cries Marat, suggesting Georg Lukács's intervention in Marxist theory in *History and Class Consciousness*, in which he critiqued the objectification of social relations.⁵⁰²

The fact that de Sade is the author of all of the political arguments cannot be forgotten, either. The intensity with which de Sade and Marat argue (and even the

⁵⁰² As a political analysis, *Marat/Sade* is similar to Heiner Müller's subsequent re-invention of the Brechtian *Lehrstück* with *Mauser*, which demonstrates "that the process of making revolution, like production itself, entails objectification, reification and the loss of consciousness of one's actions." Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, "Producing Revolution: Heiner Müller's *Mauser* as Learning Play," in Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 89.

intensity between Duperret and Marat) often makes one wonder what sort of convictions are being called into being through performance. The conundrum of identification is especially difficult in the performance of “Jacques Roux,” for we don’t really know what the inmate is, so literally does he identify with the historical personage of the “*enragé*” (radical activist) priest Jacques Roux (who died in prison in 1794). In the original text the Herald introduces the straitjacketed man as a former monk, isolated on account of his “politische Radikalität,” *playing* the role of Jacques Roux.⁵⁰³ The English version simply introduces the inmate as “Roux,” “[j]ailed for taking a radical view/ of anything you can name,” but also informs us that “unfortunately the censors cut/ most of his rabble-rousing theme” (7). Roux’s persistent outbursts indicate the visceral identification of the patient with the message, and the seeming spontaneity of his declarations also raises the possibility of improvisation, a phenomenon that haunts the action. As a history-play, improvisation within the spectacle suggests a phenomenological politics of persuasion and identification, something which de Sade himself is playing through his own drama.

A third political position is brought into play in the figures of Charlotte Corday, Duperret, and Monsieur Coulmier. This is the perspective of the bourgeoisie, the counter-revolutionaries who sought (and succeeded) in replacing the *ancien régime* not with a socialist democracy, but with a capitalist empire. “Corday,” the anguished, devout moderate who sacrifices herself in order to halt the carnage she sees ensuing at the hands of an extreme revolutionary, is Weiss’s most sympathetic character: a young girl, suffering from narcolepsy and depression, she plays her role (as patient and heroine) at the mercy of the sisters, of the aggressively nymphomaniacal patient playing Duperret, and of de Sade himself. The result is a

⁵⁰³ Peter Weiss, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marats dargestellt durch die Schauspielgruppe des Hospizes zu Charenton unter Anleitung des Herrn de Sade*, 15-16.

Charlotte Corday who sleepwalks her way through history, cutting down the agent of mass murder and yet helpless against (and oblivious to) the tide of over-consumption and decadence that follows. “Once both of us spoke a single tongue/ of brotherly love we sweetly sung/ but love meant one thing to you I see/ and something quite different to me,” she sings to Marat as her introductory ballad (14). The viciousness of the Reign of Terror is enacted by song and mime upon Corday’s “arrival in Paris,” and we hear about the street-level anarchy of 1793 from the young convent girl’s horrified point of view. Duperret, her friend from Caen, argues against political heroics, preferring instead to wait for “a society which will pool its energy/ to defend and protect/ each person for the possession of each person” (53), and mocking the “Knitting-women concierges and washer-women...pickpockets layabouts parasites” of Marat’s Revolution (77). From this perspective, the protesting words of the upper-middle-class *incroyable* Duperret are, in fact, the words of the future, and it is a provocative juxtaposition that allies the politics of Duperret and Coulmier with the idealism of Corday. Duperret’s advice to Corday is, however, accompanied by persistent molestation, a performance that underscores his political disaffection with sexually voracious self-gratification. The casting of a sex maniac as a political moderate effects a hyperbolic performance of the bourgeoisie’s presence during the Terror: profiting from the dismantlement of the aristocracy, but abstaining from supporting the democratic extremes of Robespierre and the Jacobins, Duperret [like de Sade, in fact] prioritizes personal satisfaction over political action, and advises Corday merely to wait, for the Revolutionary fire must eventually burn out.

While Duperret is a menacing priapic cartoon, the director of the asylum is, in fact, the proof that Duperret’s plan was the historical winner. Coulmier, the authority in charge of the state asylum, is the image of bourgeois ascendance that replaced the violence of the *ancien régime* and the Revolution. Coulmier objects to the

condemnations of the Church and the military that erupt out of the historical procession. For instance, he deems Marat's lambast on the oppressive collusion of the Church to be excessive, for "[a]fter all nobody now objects to the church...and since it's been proved over and over again/ that the poor need the spiritual comfort of the priests/ There's no question of anyone being oppressed" (29). Marat attacks the existential immorality of an (essentially feudal) institution; Coulmier's objection, however, has no grounding in moral debate. Rather, the church is, for the society of 1808, a useful institution of social order. The nuns who control the patients utilize this mechanism of civil society whenever emotion erupts from the chorus of patients, praying and singing a "tranquilizing litany" [*eine Litanei zur Beruhigung*], as described by the stage directions (12). Likewise, Coulmier strenuously objects to Marat's condemnations of the military and financial leaders who have been absolved by the new government and now provide support for the imperial power. His authority is most insidious when considering the issue of individual human rights, for his position exists for the general welfare of the oppressed.

Coulmier is also, of course, the audience's host for the evening, and his welcome identifies a solidarity between the Coulmiers and the audience members: after all, de Sade's play is performed for "our delectation." The vectors of spectatorship, like those of historical voice, are labyrinthine in complexity. In Brechtian tradition, the audience is made explicitly aware of its own process of spectatorship. In this instance, the secure position of the spectator always teeters on the brink of performance, and the position of the ticket-paying audience is never completely stabilized, despite the period-piece atmosphere of the performances on stage. For the occasion is located in the year 1808, and the subject matter of the play-within-the-play takes place in 1793, and so the metatheatricity of the event impels a sense of double-period-performance, into which the audience is enveloped. The

Herald's Presentation of the show is, in fact, a prime example of what Roland Barthes has described as the "speech act of the historian,"⁵⁰⁴ calling into being the existential realm of our evening's experience: "Tonight the date/ is the thirteenth of July eighteen-o-eight/ And on this night our cast intend/ showing how fifteen years ago night without end/ fell on that man that invalid (*points at Marat*)/ And you are going to see him bleed (*points at Marat's breast*)/ and see this woman after careful thought (*points at Corday*)/ take up the dagger and cut him short" (8). The Herald, responding to all interjections, is the most important character in the dialectical machinery, for it is he who counters all objections, even (or perhaps, especially) the improvised, with the cry of "history!" All indications of political belief are interpreted as a process of creating an historical context, an excuse that also applies to the spectators, for all are players in the bathhouse; the audience of *Marat/Sade* is endowed with importance as the witnesses to this historical event.

As the phenomenological status of time is constantly in flux in the performance of *Marat/Sade*, the London and New York audiences of 1964-1966 were experiencing this socio-ethical-political debate amidst three temporal plateaux: the historical action of 1793, the performance time of 1808, and the viewing time. Marat's protesting prediction late in the second act registers as an indictment of First World economic imperialism and defense research: "they will be completely in charge/ in their marble homes and granite banks/ from which they rob the people of the world/ under the pretence of bringing them culture...weapons rapidly developed/ by servile scientists/ will become more and more deadly" (56). Likewise, the Cold War moment of the mid-1960's resonates in Corday's indictment of Marat as a bloodthirsty tyrant, who manipulated the poor with socialist propaganda in order to gain power. In the second act, Marat reiterates his political cry to the "mob": "Fellow

⁵⁰⁴ Barthes, "The Discourse of History," in *The Rustle of Language*, 127-140

citizens/ did we fight for the freedom of those who now exploit us again” (76), protesting that the Jacobins “do not murder/ we kill in self-defence” (79). But ultimately, despite Marat’s socialist intentions and his accusations against the financiers who have corrupted the Revolution, and despite the excessive violence of the Terror’s control (performed as a boisterous guillotine pantomime), the “mob” ensemble’s repeated refrain reveals the cynical lesson to be learned from a revolution in the name of freedom: “Marat we’re poor and the poor stay poor!” The ensemble of unstable desires and allegiances demonstrates the fragile nature of political integrity, leading us to what McKenzie has pointed out as the two fundamental problems behind to pinning down a definite political statement inherent to the drama: namely “the function of the madhouse setting and the role of Marat.”⁵⁰⁵

The representative of “sanity,” Coulmier—for whom the Revolution was a failed political event—repeatedly objects to tirades against the now-stable institutions of civil society: businessmen, the Church, and the military. The Herald excuses the political speeches that cause unrest among the patients with the defense of history, however, for “the men of that time mostly now demised/ were primitive we are more civilized” (22). The Herald is a liminal figure, the narrator for de Sade’s vision but also a jester who rises above all rules for civil society, including rational discourse and the expectation that insanity be clearly legible. Brook provided no clear indication of the Herald’s qualifications for being an asylum inmate, and he is symbolically endowed with the trickster characteristics of creator and fool, wielding the play-controlling staff and wearing a Harlequin smock. He is able to cease the flow of history at the height of the patients’ song for “Revolution NOW.” At this moment, the close of the first act, it is tempting to see the Herald as Weiss’s characterization of Brecht himself, swinging the rattle like a conductor’s wand and pointedly presenting

⁵⁰⁵ McKenzie, “Peter Weiss and the Politics of ‘Marat/Sade,’” 310.

to each side what they want to hear. The Herald's announcement at the close of the first act is a quintessentially Brechtian pronouncement on the performative nature of historiography:

let's interpose a drinking thinking time/ while you recall that what our cast presents/ is simply a series of events/ but that our end which might seem prearranged/ could be delayed or even changed/ We will since it's a play not actual history/ postpone it with an interval. (71)

This invitation to the spectators is laden with arch commentary. Understood is the need for the bourgeois audience to take a break from the lessons of the theatre, with a cocktail and conversation during intermission. The acknowledgement of this prearrangement is also an astute comment on the intricacies of historiography, for the writing of history always depends upon the reader as well as the writer.

This is an essential Brechtian quality of the play, and Weiss was guided by Brecht's commitment to critique. Both Weiss's play and de Sade's "play" offer social and political contradictions, much as the great living contradiction embodied by Mother Courage, and placement of these dialogues in multiple historical contexts encourages a critical reflection on the way in which philosophy plays out in reality. Characters tell the audience what they stand for, and, in an "epic" construction, their actions are carried out in a rigidly prescribed set of contingencies. The political dialectic is laid out in an explicit dialogue between de Sade and Marat, in which de Sade appears to be appeasing Coulmier. In complete context, however, de Sade is not advocating Coulmier's order of bourgeois civil society so much as he is reveling in the innate human drive to power and pleasure. On the other hand, Marat's socialist doctrine, so alarming to Coulmier, draws the attention of the patients:

The rumour spreads/ that the workers can soon expect higher wages/ Why/ (*The Head of a Patient appears from behind the curtain, which is opened from inside*)/ Because this raises production and increases demand/ to fill the rich man's gold-chest/ Don't imagine/ that you can beat them without using force/ (*the Patients rise one by one and advance slowly, listening intently*)" (55).

But de Sade mocks Marat's vision of the poor overcoming an economic hierarchy, and setting the Four Singers to mime his song of the workers, he rejects the principle that men will ever be happy with total equality. His final evidence is the internecine violence that equality has sparked in the idealists, who "would like to kill each other over trifles." "But they aren't trifles" Marat insists; "They are matters of principle" (57). For de Sade, the Revolution has been a perfect sociological experiment. The individual's drive to desire is rooted in a performance of power, whether sexual, economic, or political; idealism can only repress this drive or force it into a collective identity: it cannot negate it. For Marat, the Revolution is an example of a failed but promising attempt for universal human freedom. Of course, the audience must always remember that de Sade is the source of both arguments: he is, in fact, having a philosophical dialogue with himself. But while the arguments of de Sade, Marat, and Coulmier are expressed as rational debate, the patients, the Herald, and the Four Singers play out the story as a general experience, and their actions connect the political hypotheses to the social material of history.

The history of the French Revolution and its aftermath inspired Marx's famous opening of "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in which he amends Hegel by stating that historical events and personages occur twice, but "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."⁵⁰⁶ De Sade's drama of the Revolution hovers somewhere between the two. Despite the weight of the philosophical arguments, the construction of the play rests upon a foundation of absurdity, which regularly tosses the players and the conflicts up into the air in distorted positions. To continue with Marx's theory of history, "[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but

⁵⁰⁶ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 594.

under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”⁵⁰⁷ The political debate of the play represents the struggle to envision a history that breaks free from the weight of inherited ideologies. When Marat and de Sade engage in a profound conflict of political convictions, de Sade has no faith in enacting political belief at all: “The lukewarm liberals and the angry radicals/ all believe in the greatness of France/ Marat/ can’t you see this patriotism is lunacy” (40). Convinced that the ideals of the Revolution were true, and that it was only its execution that failed, Marat laments that “[i]t becomes clear/ that the Revolution was fought/ for merchants and shopkeepers/ the bourgeoisie” (42). The “crowd’s” affection for Marat’s convictions is reflected in the manic enthusiasm of the collective patients, and the Four Singers seem to absorb the lessons of “Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité,” echoing Marat’s lament in a more vulgar fashion with their song: “Revolution it’s more like ruin/ They’re all stuffed with glorious food/ They think about nothing but screwing/ but we are the ones who get screwed” (42). The efficacy of philosophy is tossed aside in the following scene, however, when we see the singers more easily inspired by a wine bottle than by any political message. The Four Singers are, in effect, the proletarians of Weiss’s play, but whereas in the East German production they were interpreted as *sans-culottes*, the “vanguard of the proletarian class,”⁵⁰⁸ in the Brook production they were effectively a “lumpenproletariat”⁵⁰⁹: a working-class rabble who are more representative of a folk culture than a revolutionary political movement. Two scenes previously, the singers were playing dice and cards while Duperret and Corday debated the use of active resistance against the Jacobin Terror. Now, as Jacques Roux breaks out with a socialist cry to action -- “Stand up stand in front of them/ and let

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 595.

⁵⁰⁸ Kirshner, “Marat or Sade? Peter Weiss and his play in London and Rostock,” in *To Find Something New*, ed. Grosshans, 99.

⁵⁰⁹ Suvin, “Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*,” 408.

them see how many of you there are” -- the proletariat pass a bottle around in response (43). The impassioned activist is censored by Coulmier and restrained by the nurses, but we must wonder what justifies this reactionary response when “*the Four Singers listen to the disturbance, but soon lost interest. They quarrel for the last drop of the bottle*” (44). The political philosophy that flies through the air of the Charenton bathhouse is only part of the discourse of de Sade’s performance event. The instability and unpredictability of the assembly, of patients and nurses and director, suggest an historical struggle that cannot be contained within rational discourse, but rather is unleashed through bottles of wine and insane musicians.

The clowns’ version of history (in the English version) is a rich, ironic march from 1793 up to 1808, with important dates indicated by the Herald with banners. The Herald halts the action right before Corday assassinates Marat, in the style of a ring-master drawing out the tension before the ultimate dangerous stunt, or as a television show leaves a gun pointed at the hero and abruptly switches to a commercial. Geoffrey Skelton and Adrian Mitchell significantly adapted the “song of history” from the original text for the Brook production (a fairly literal translation of the song is included in the published play text). Richard Peaslee’s march music is reminiscent of a patriotic anthem (4/4 time; downbeat on 1; non-syncopated phrasing; resolving upon tonic and dominant chords), and as such the adapted lyrics are much condensed from the original verse. The resulting song is a populist chorus that emphasizes the movement of time, echoed by the marching choreography of the patients. The original (German) lyrics tell of the immediate events following Marat’s death in detail, including young Captain Bonaparte’s 1793 victory against the Royalists at Toulon; the execution of Danton as a “traitor” to the Revolution in 1794; and Robespierre’s and Roux’s subsequent deaths. The song ends with the introduction of Napoleon, who “comes from Sardinia or Corsica, like you” (a riff on Duperret’s earlier sneer at Marat

as being a Corsican or a Sardinian...or Jewish...or whatever), and who “promises us eternal peace/ and gives us jobs in the gun-smithies/ and in honor of the Revolution/ calls himself Emperor Napoleon.”⁵¹⁰ The Skelton/Mitchell adaptation (which I shall refer to as the “Brook” song) distills the heavy irony of the original song into a recurring refrain of “Fifteen glorious years/ fifteen glorious years/ Years of peace/ years of war/ each year greater/ than the year before/ Marat/ we’re marching on.”⁵¹¹ The Brook song transforms the historical anthem from one that documents the violent failure of the Revolution immediately following Marat’s death to a pageant of fifteen years of political intrigue. The change is noteworthy, for in the Brook production, the clowns celebrate history as a fifteen-year continual pageant of war and profiteering, not referencing the specific locations and personages of the French Revolution (the Vendée, Toulon, Roux), but rather referencing the offensives against Austria, Egypt, England, Prussia, and Russia. The resulting march is a historical portrait of Napoleonic imperialism, a perspective only obliquely referenced in Weiss’s original text. The adapted song makes an intriguing difference to the concluding action of the play. Whereas the original lyrics conclude with a clearly ironic declamation regarding an imperial heir to the “democratic” revolution, the Brook refrain, celebrating “fifteen glorious years of peace and war,” recycles the earlier political philosophy through the “mob’s” interpretation. The singers, who throughout the play have sung to “Marat” in supplication, now declare Napoleon to be their salvation—using the same rhetoric that they have learned from Marat’s speeches. Marat’s cry against the accusation of bloodthirsty violence is that “We do not murder/ we kill in self-defence” (79); the Singers now adopt the recusatory position in favor of Napoleon’s post-Revolutionary

⁵¹⁰ Weiss, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung*, 129. (“*Der Bonaparte ist jetzt da/ stammt wie du aus Sardinia oder Corsica/ Und er verspricht uns den ewigen Frieden/ und gibt uns Arbeit in den Waffenschmieden/ und zu Ehren der Revolution/ nennt er sich Kaiser Napoleon.*”)

⁵¹¹ Weiss, *The Persecution and Assassination...* The adapted song is pages 96-98 of the play-text. A (rhymed) literal translation is found on pp. 103-104.

“reforms”: “All men want to be free/ If they don’t/ never mind/ we’ll abolish all mankind” (98). The Brook song emphasizes the 15-year long progression of political violence in the name of freedom and advancement. The Herald’s introduction of the song as a “musical history” is key (there is no mention of music or history in the Herald’s introduction to the song in the original text).

The performance of history as a musical pageant is a very Brechtian approach to political narrative, and the production included two other musical history pageants, in fact, which are worth considering. “Historical conditions” were one of Brecht’s primary obsessions in laying out a cohesive theory of a dialectical theatre. Thesis #38 of his “Short Organum” declares that these conditions “must of course not be imagined (nor will they be so constructed) as mysterious Powers (in the background); on the contrary, they are created and maintained by men (and will in due course be altered by them): it is the actions taking place before us that allow us to see what they are.”⁵¹² The grotesque Festival of Fools in the middle of *Galileo* is one of the most well-known instances in which Brecht effected a comic performance of historical conditions, created and burlesqued by the crowd through song and parade. In similar fashion, de Sade’s drama of Marat includes a grotesque parade of the humanistic forces that inspired and transformed Marat himself into a fanatical political activist. “The Face of Marat,” the last scene of the first act, is a fantastical pantomime in which the patient/players play out Marat’s upbringing, including his parents, Schoolmaster, and a priest. The fantasy also creates a social history of Marat’s career as a scientist-cum-philosopher-cum-activist, with snide commentary by a Military Representative, a Scientist, and none other than Lavoisier and Voltaire themselves. Antoine Lavoisier, one of the greatest scientists of the age, was in fact a victim of Robespierre’s Terror and was guillotined in 1794, adding to the political implications of Marat’s personal

⁵¹² Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 190.

nightmare. The parade of characters in a cart (who stand for “Science, the Army, the Church, the Nouveaux Riches,” as the stage directions indicate [62]), torment the feverish Marat, recounting his childhood as an ominous play-time for his revolutionary potential: “Even as a child/ this Marat/ made groups of his friends/ rush screaming at each other/ they fought with wooden swords/ ...and they took prisoners/ and bound and tortured them/ and nobody knew why,” the School-Master sings in a falsetto (63-64). Detested by his dream-parents, mocked by the leaders of the Academy, Marat is now (fifteen years after his death) haunted with accusations of being greedy for titles (by the Military Representative); of embezzling (by the Scientist); of quackery (by the Bourgeois). The nightmare transforms Marat and de Sade’s complex philosophical debate into a vulgar defamation. The power of social history—that is, the history collected and preserved in general communication—is hereby performed in its coarsest form, echoing the march of the bloated, Bible-burning Galileo-in-effigy in Brecht’s Carnival festival scene.

One other historical pageant warrants attention, for it was one of the most talked-about scenes in reaction to the Brook production. The tenth scene, the “Song and Mime of Corday’s Arrival in Paris,” was an intricate, pantomimed spectacle of the Terror of 1793, while the Four Singers sing the song of Corday’s arrival in Paris from Caen. While the singers describe Corday’s stunned walk through the city (in a folk-ballad construction), the patients play types, such as the modish flirts and dandies called the “Incroyables” and the “Merveilleuses,” as well as banner-bearers, prostitutes, victims on the tumbrel and a priest giving the last rites. The “procession” turns into a “dance of death,” which ultimately leads to the guillotine. The patients mimed the process of guillotine executions, scraping against the metal bars of the floor-grates, piling together in the bath-cells so their heads stack up at stage level, and pouring buckets of red, blue, and black paint into buckets in the baths. The

pantomime, performed to music (“Don’t soil your pretty little shoes,” the clowns sing; “The gutter’s deep and red/ Climb up climb up and ride along with me/ the tumbrel driver said” [19]), is certainly an alienating, stylized performance, and the brutality of the context adds a discomforting edge to what might become an overly burlesque satire. The performers, after all, are incarcerated and socially marginalized, some also physically disabled, and the mime becomes a pageant of historical and on-going (self-) subjugation, performed with ironic glee.

The grotesque pantomime of the historical Terror is, in this scene, an example of shock going beyond pure aesthetic impact by forcing the spectator to consider historical violence as a live spectacle, according to Brecht’s theory of alienation.⁵¹³ It is also a 20th century continuation of the carnivalesque, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, transmuting a performative form of social expression into an artistic historiography. In these three historical pageants, and especially in the “Song and Mime of Corday’s Arrival in Paris,” the French Revolution itself is Carnival: history is written as a carnivalesque performance. The Western tradition of carnival, as analyzed by Bakhtin, is not just a traditional celebration in accordance with the Catholic Church calendar; it is a complex social mechanism that re-calibrates the relationships between the individual, social norms, and ideological constraints. “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it,” wrote Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*; “During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part.”⁵¹⁴ The integrity of event-specific social norms is, in this schema, linked to a mythical construct of social regeneration, to which laughter is essential. In this regard, comedy is the driving force

⁵¹³ See Chapter 2 on the relationship between shock, the alienation effect and the performance of history in Brecht’s theoretical essays.

⁵¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Morris, 198.

of Revolution. “Laughter... overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations,” Bakhtin writes; “Through this victory laughter clarified man’s consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life. This truth was ephemeral; it was followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life, but from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man which prepared the new Renaissance consciousness.”⁵¹⁵ It is of course a leap in historical paradigms from this theorization of the medieval carnival to the political revolutions of the Enlightenment, but it suggests the hypothesis that laughter is a strong aesthetic reaction to oppression, which was transported through the European paradigms of humanistic individualism and Enlightenment rationality. The enduring social power of laughter thus remains through the philosophical movement from the individual subject as a center of rational thought to individual agency as a basis of political action. In this genealogy, the carnivalesque sensibility of laughter endures as a lever of revolutionary action. The performance of Revolution as a violent, chaotic comedy in *Marat/Sade* is a descendent of the medieval hell described by Bakhtin:

We have already mentioned that one of the indispensable accessories of carnival was the set called “hell.” This “hell” was solemnly burned at the peak of the festivities. This grotesque image cannot be understood without appreciating the defeat of fear. The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome burden becomes a “comic monster.”⁵¹⁶

When the socially unfit performers of de Sade’s play become clown-victims of the Terror, the Revolution becomes a comic monster indeed, and the oppressions of a failed democratic movement and the subsequent construction of an empire becomes the stuff of comedy. Just as Bakhtin’s 1940 dissertation on Rabelais might be read as a double-voiced work of literary criticism and a “subversively satiric attack upon

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 209.

many specific aspects of official Stalinist repression,”⁵¹⁷ and as Mikhail Bulgakov mined Molière’s experience as a Bourbon subject to express the Soviet artist’s shackles, so Weiss uses the carnival of the French Revolution to celebrate the failure of philosophy in 20th century socialist revolutions. A viewer cannot distance the play as allegory, however, for the audience itself is too embedded in the burning of hell, as spectators of the spectacle. The forced participation of all who come near a performance of *Marat/Sade* brings the play back to the origins of carnival; its historical dialectic is thus also a social ritual.

Brechtian dialectics/Artaudian cruelty

This phenomenological world of the “Asylum of Charenton” is where the power of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is called into collaboration with Brecht’s dialectic theatre. One of the most powerful decisions that Brook made as a director was to mate Weiss’s Brechtian dialogue to the Artaudian experience. The fluidity of audience and performance is a practice of both legacies, despite their strategic differences. As chapter 2 of this study demonstrates, Brecht sought to integrate the intellectual and political spheres of modern life into the theatre, while always acknowledging that the theatre was an entrenched artistic institution that would incorporate adaptations so long as they ensured its self-sustainability. In this regard, Brecht deviated from what Peter Bürger describes as the historical avant-garde impulse to collapse art, politics, and everyday life into a unified practice. Likewise, Antonin Artaud is an anomalous figure within the historical avant-garde, although for the opposite reason. At one point a writer of manifestoes for *La Révolution surréaliste*, Artaud broke with the group and worked (between committances to mental hospitals for psychological breakdowns and drug addiction) on projects for his theatre, Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry. While Brecht’s political convictions and intellectual

⁵¹⁷ Pam Morris, editorial note referencing Michael Holquist in *The Bakhtin Reader*, 194.

inquiries were channeled through specific developments of artistic practice, Artaud sought to transform the aesthetics of Western theatrical institutions for their own sake. The pure aesthetic experience—in its largest sense, that of sense perception—of surrealism drove his vision for a performative practice that operated in its own experiential sphere. “I believe in the true effectiveness of theatre,” he wrote in 1932, “but not on the level of everyday life.”⁵¹⁸ In this he is at stark odds with the political impetus of the contemporaneous avant-garde. Nevertheless, he maintained the avant-garde technique of mobilizing through manifestoes and essays, published in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, *Cahiers du Sud*, *Paris-Soir*, and in pamphlets. He wrote in support and explanation of the Alfred Jarry theatre from its conception in 1926 until its last gasp in 1930, and thereon continued to write and conceptualize in fuller fashion what the theatre ought to produce, including the essays eventually collectively published in 1938 as “The Theatre and Its Double.” For Artaud, the “cruel” aesthetic was a way of life, and he sought to re-define the institution of the theatre to propagate this new, immediate aesthetic sensibility for a decaying, anaesthetized Western man.

The cruelty of Artaud’s theatre lies not in physical torture, pain, or blood, but rather in its visceral impact upon the participant. The aesthetic of cruelty is, in this regard, the complete opposite of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, although both have underlying impetuses: the application of live performance towards social critique. For Brecht, the desired critique was politically inspired; for Artaud, it was a critique of the assumed “real” of modern aesthetic perception. Artaud’s conception of a theatrical project also includes a complex conception of the comic. In his first manifesto for Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry, Artaud asserted that “with such theatre, we re-establish a connection with life, instead of cutting ourselves off from it...Our sort of style, whether in tragedy or comedy, is one that makes you smile a rather sickly smile at a

⁵¹⁸ Artaud, “The Theatre I’m About to Set Up,” in *Artaud on Theatre*, 73.

certain point.”⁵¹⁹ There are arguably laughable moments in *Marat/Sade*, but the emergence of smiles, let alone laughter, on the part of the spectator has more implications than merely the presence of comedy in a Bergsonian sense. Whereas Henri Bergson (and later Northrop Frye) would theorize laughter and comedy as a social mechanism that functions as a Newtonian reaction to a violation of social norms or of human mechanics, the Artaudian vision of laughter is an opening up of an alternative ontology, a de-stabilization of moral valuation in general. The “sickly smile” of the cruel theatre is an indicator of a contagious social pathology, and the spectators’ inclusion as characters within the play (i.e., as the audience), impels a sort of social improvisation. The clowning of the singers, and their gross vulgarity, is the most important source of playfulness and apparent improvisation in the performance. Rossignol’s ingenuous advice to Marat during the characters’ introductions suggests the liminal position of the singers as real/playing: “Don’t scratch your scabs or they’ll never get any better,” she admonishes the paranoiac player, suggesting that for the Singers, the Revolution is *now*—and it is a game. The singers are both patients in the mental hospital and special agents of de Sade’s message, translating his philosophical prose into easily digestible ditties and playing around as a trickster-proletariat within his play world of 1793. And yet to laugh at their antics is to adopt the position of Coulmier, a position of control. As his invited guests, the audience becomes consumers of a comedy of the incarcerated. The audience is part of the event taking place in the bathhouse of the Asylum of Charenton, participating in the spectacle as Artaud wished for his Alfred Jarry theatre: “theatre will no longer be a straitjacketed thing, imprisoned in the restricted area of the stage...[the] production will be as thrilling as a game, like a card game with the whole audience taking part.”⁵²⁰ Both

⁵¹⁹ Artaud, “The Alfred Jarry Theatre” (1926 pamphlet), in *Artaud on Theatre*, 32.

⁵²⁰ Artaud, “The Alfred Jarry Theatre” (1928 pamphlet), in *Artaud on Theatre*, 38.

metaphors, Artaud's game room and Brecht's laboratory, are dependant upon spectatorship that not only participates in the action, but also has a vital stake in the project. The politics of pleasure for all involved is as perverse as de Sade and Artaud could wish, culminating in applause as an assault. The enjoyment of the players (including the audience) in the process of performing revolution becomes, as Artaud predicted, a contagious plague.

Weiss was interviewed by *Tulane Drama Review* editor Erika Munk for the Autumn 1966 issue, and when asked about Artaud's influence on *Marat/Sade*, he claims that "I didn't think of Artaud when I wrote *Marat/Sade*, which grew out of its own material and had to be played a certain way in the atmosphere which the material created. However, Peter Brook *was* thinking of Artaud before he produced *Marat/Sade*, and he used Artaudian techniques. This is a director's method, and for a writer it's secondary."⁵²¹ The director Peter Brook encouraged an Artaudian performance through his rehearsal methodology, recounted in his theatrical manifesto *The Empty Space*. The 1968 book is an intriguing collection of essays, not only as a manifesto by one of the most influential Western directors of the 20th century, but also as an historical document that contextualizes the shift in the theatrical apparatus at this key moment in Anglo-American theatre history. Brook critiques the contemporaneous habits of the leading theatre centers, for in "New York and London play after play presents serious leading characters within a softened, diluted or unexplored context."⁵²² *The Empty Space* provides context for Brook himself as a creative artist and his personal attraction to Weiss's play, which appeared to the director at a moment when he sought to develop the mainstream Anglo-American theatre with a new sensibility.

⁵²¹ Munk, et al., "A Living World: An Interview with Peter Weiss," in *The Tulane Drama Review* (Autumn, 1966), 111.

⁵²² Ibid., 84.

The Empty Space is organized as a conceptual outline of theatre, broken into four sections: the Deadly Theatre; the Holy Theatre; the Rough Theatre; and the Immediate Theatre. The “deadly” theatre is theatre with no life in it, that is, theatre that does not live for its own moment. Brook emphasizes the fact that this is not a condemnation of commercial theatre, but rather a characterization of theatre that can occur in any productive venue. Brook’s descriptive analysis includes both dull theatre and empty flash; the uniting etiology for the deadly theatre seems to be a lack of purpose or passion behind its creation. The play itself is not necessarily the symptom, either: “the Deadly Theatre finds its deadly way into grand opera and tragedy, into the plays of Molière and Brecht.”⁵²³ In the final section, on “the Immediate Theatre,” Brook considers his own work as an example of theatre that is the opposite of deadly, that is, theatre that erupts out of improvisation and contemporary inspiration.

In the middle sections, on the “Holy” and the “Rough” theatres, we get a clearer insight into Brook’s appreciation of both Artaud and Brecht, which clarifies his approach to Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*. His reference for the “holy” theatre is Artaud: a theatre “working like the plague, by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic; a theatre in which the play, the event itself, stands in place of a text.”⁵²⁴ Brook’s directorial approach, akin to that of Michel St. Denis and George Devine,⁵²⁵ relied upon time-intensive exploration rehearsals with a bonded ensemble. This approach, although usually text-based, nevertheless promulgated theatre as a *creative* endeavor rather than a *goal-oriented* production. Brook describes exercises of the type that are

⁵²³ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 10.

⁵²⁴ Ibid, 49.

⁵²⁵ St. Denis ran an acting studio in England in the 1930s and 1940s and was involved with the company at the Old Vic and later with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Devine was artistic director of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre from 1956 until his death in 1966. Both profoundly influenced the British theatre in the mid-twentieth century by incorporating new acting and movement techniques and improvisation into the training and production process, and they mentored directors such as Keith Johnstone, Tony Richardson, and William Gaskill, as well as many actors and playwrights.

routine in acting classes of today and part of actors' required study, such as an exploration of Meyerhold's biomechanics. Brook enthusiastically references the infamous Happenings of the New York experimental performance scene, appreciating the general change in the theatre-as-social-apparatus that connected Happenings with contemporary performances in the larger realm. "Occasion, Event, Happening—the words are interchangeable. The structures are different—the opera is constructed and repeated according to traditional principles, the light-show unfolds for the first and last time according to accident and environment; but both are deliberately constructed social gatherings that seek for an invisibility to interpenetrate and animate the ordinary."⁵²⁶ As he himself writes, though, a pure Artaudian theatre would negate itself: "Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed."⁵²⁷ Brook's keen perception of the changing needs of his contemporary audience (white, Anglo-American, and predominantly middle-class) connects to his tandem inspiration by Artaud and Brecht.

The "Rough" theatre is the popular theatre, theatre that speaks with the audience in a common language, a vernacular performance, even if the spoken text is in verse. Brook embraces Meyerhold, Brecht, Littlewood, Cocteau, and Jarry all as proponents of a rough theatre. The rough theatre is the breeding ground for comedy, rough and dirty comedy, comedy that attacks society and shows it at its meanest, evoking pleasure out of wickedness. In differentiating the "Holy" and the "Rough," Brook writes, "The Holy Theatre deals with the invisible and this invisible contains all the hidden impulses of man. The Rough Theatre deals with men's actions, and because it is down to earth and direct—because it admits wickedness and laughter—the rough and ready seems better than the hollowly holy."⁵²⁸ Brook offers Brecht as the quintessential representative of the rough, and he praises the tactics of *alienation* as a

⁵²⁶ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 47.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

manner of play that makes human action concrete rather than spiritual. Celebrating Brecht's contributions to the modern theatre work, Brook recognizes the powerful alienating effects of Joan Littlewood's Pierrot soldiers and Genet's grotesqueries, and asserts that *Marat/Sade* "could not have existed before Brecht."⁵²⁹

Brook's analysis of theatrical potential concludes for a new approach to theatre, one that seeks to adapt the "rough" and the "holy" for a contemporary audience. His paragon of a thoroughly synthesized theatre is Shakespeare, a world of theatrical language that perpetually pits the humanistic impulse of individual spirit against a critique of the collective context. This is what Brook seeks to create in the contemporary theatre world: a performative realm that puts into play the "relationship between man and the evolving society around him," a tension between the individual and his (or her) contextual impulses. Importantly, in his analysis of "revolutionary" versus "individualist" theatres, Brook references Peter Weiss, who "emerges just at the moment when his Brechtianism is related to obsessive individualism to a degree unthinkable in Brecht himself."⁵³⁰ The inherent tension in the play between the rational dialectic and the phenomenology of its embodied performance offered Brook an opportunity to infuse his own theatrical apparatus with something both rough and holy. This process entailed fusing the spectators themselves with the theatrical experience, in the dual traditions of (holy) ritual and the (rough) popular theatre of circus and bearbaiting.

The establishment of a free space, an "empty" space to use Brook's language, is thus a disestablishment of theatrical boundaries. The divisions between character and role, between audience and performer, and between script and improvisation are never stable, or at least they appear to be unstable. Just as the dialogue between de

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 84.

Sade and Marat calls into question the fundamental truths of Enlightenment political discourse, so does the performative power of asylum-inmates-as-historical-reenactors suggest a new mode of theatre – a theatre like the plague. Artaud’s cryptic metaphor builds upon his observation that the actor’s body exhibits symptoms that are such as “an absolute and almost abstract disease...Everything in the physical aspect of the actor, as in that of the victim of the plague, shows that life has reacted to the paroxysm, and yet nothing has happened.”⁵³¹ “Marat” himself, for instance, embodies the fervor and paranoia of the revolutionary leader; contained within his bath, he forcefully impels a death that is not his own, embracing the paroxysm of martyrdom without its finality. He may reenact his disease and death as often as he likes, displaying the symptoms of a political plague and his own position as an incarcerated member of the socially “unfit.” In Weiss’s text, the climactic stage directions for de Sade’s play read that “Corday, suddenly wide awake, raises her arms high for a violent stroke and thrusts the dagger into Marat’s chest.”⁵³² Interestingly, in Brook’s production, Marat himself grabs the dagger and thrusts it into his “chest” (his armpit), a moment of premature penetration. Brook’s staging of the assassination reiterates the position of Corday as a historical sleep-walker. The ensemble of patients is also infected with Marat’s surplus disease, and it performs revolution *ad infinitum*. Marat’s and Duperret’s speeches inspire wild cries and whistles, during Marat’s “you will never shake off the past/ you will never understand/ the great upheaval in which you find yourselves” and Duperret’s sneer at “Released prisoners/ escaped lunatics” (77). The discourse of the prison of the body, free will, freedom, and oppression has infected the body politic of the asylum bathhouse, performing Artaud’s metaphor literally, to the word:

⁵³¹ Artaud, “The Theater and the Plague,” *The Theater and Its Double*, 24.

⁵³² Weiss, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung...*, 130. (“Corday, plötzlich klarwach, holt mit den Armen weit zum gewaltsamen Hieb aus und stößt den Dolch in Marats Brust.”)

And just as it is not impossible that the unavailing despair of the lunatic screaming in an asylum can cause the plague by a sort of reversibility of feelings and images, one can similarly admit that the external events, political conflicts, natural cataclysms, the order of revolution and the disorder of war, by occurring in the context of the theater, discharge themselves into the sensibility off an audience with all the force of an epidemic.⁵³³

For the spectators, who are guests at the asylum, the plagues of insanity and revolution become one and the same, infecting all at the conclusion. As Coulmier and his family congratulate de Sade on his successful project, the patients continue to perform revolutionary protest. Overcome with de Sade's "virus," the chorus chants: "Charenton Charenton/ Napoleon Napoleon/ Nation Nation/ Revolution Revolution/ Copulation Copulation" (101). All the actors can do is continue to perform, and the spectators are performers as well, watching the patients leaping and dancing, and being restrained and beaten with batons by the nurses. The audience's complicity in this performance is a diagnosis as well, for, as Artaud predicted, revolution and war unleash an epidemic throughout the theatre. The audience's symptom, as bourgeois theatre-goers, was its inability to act while revolution is performed. Here are the stage directions for the conclusion of the play:

The Herald begins to throw buckets etc. around. Nurses try to restrain him. Coulmier's family flee, screaming and shouting...the Nurses go among the patients wielding their batons...The Patients are fully at the mercy of their mad marchlike dance. Many of them hop and spin in ecstasy. Coulmier incites the Nurses to extreme violence. Patients are struck down. The Herald is now in front of the orchestra, leaping about in time to the music. Sade stands upright on his chair, laughing triumphantly. In desperation Coulmier gives the signal to close the curtain. CURTAIN. (101-102)

Brook continued the event through the traditional curtain call as well, after the patients had erupted into a full-scale riot, attacking the Coulmiers. The riot was stopped only when the actual stage manager of the production came out, blowing a whistle: "the actors abruptly stop, turn, and face the audience; but when the audience applauds, the

⁵³³ Artaud, "The Theater and the Plague," in *The Theater and Its Double*, 25-26.

company responds with a slow ominous handclap, drowning out the ‘free’ applause and leaving everyone pretty uncomfortable,” according to a description by Susan Sontag.⁵³⁴ The gesture reinforced the absurdity of the audience’s participation in the entire spectacle, an audience who had watched the performance at the invitation of the respectable member of society, a director of a state institution. The original spectators had paid a West End or Broadway ticket price to watch a dramatization of a play by the Marquis de Sade, filtered through the performance of insanity and incarceration. They sat, as they had been trained, watching the plague unleashed, and waiting for the escape to an after-show cocktail. The concluding applause from the inmates commended their participation in the social laboratory of the theatre, as Brecht would say. At the same time, it was a sardonic commendation of collusion in a performance of political manipulation. Consumers of a packaged aesthetic, the audience was never in actual danger of becoming one of the socially unfit who are forced to perform a philosophical rhetoric without any actual political empowerment. The metaposition of the spectator might be read as an allegory of the consumption of aesthetic and political discourse as just that: a consumable item. Considering this “meta-dialogue” as a sort of alternating current of aesthetic efficacy, we can see that the world of the Charenton bathhouse is one governed by discourse but then destabilized by a sensibility of improvised play.

***Marat/Sade* as post/modern/avant-garde**

As discussed in chapter one, French philosopher Jacques Derrida turned to Artaud in the early 1960s as a creative prophet who indicated an alternative perspective to an aesthetic project in a literate globe. In his deconstruction of speech in the essay “La parole soufflée,” Derrida appreciates Artaud’s peculiar insistence upon the body as the center of expression:

⁵³⁴ Sontag, “Marat/Sade/Artaud,” in *Against Interpretation*, 166.

Artaud promises the existence of a speech that is a body, of a body that is a theater, of a theater that is a text because it is no longer enslaved to a writing more ancient than itself, an ur-text or an ur-speech...Beating his flesh in order to reawaken it at the eve prior to the deportation, Artaud attempted to forbid that his speech be spirited away [soufflé] from his body.⁵³⁵

In *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud proposes “to renounce our empiricism of imagery, in which the unconscious furnishes images at random...I propose to return through the theater to an idea of the physical knowledge of images and the means of inducing trances...”⁵³⁶ The theatre of cruelty, i.e. a theatre that was created on sheer action and sensation, was an avant-garde rebellion against the conditioning factors that had fabricated both linguistic sign-systems and a self-conscious subject. The Artaudian bodies of Brook’s *Marat/Sade* achieved such an aesthetic communication through their existence on the stage as bodies marked by abjection, as critics such as Stanton Garner and Marvin Carlson have shown. De Sade’s insistence upon physical sensation as a means to comprehension, most outrageously displayed in his soliloquy-with-flagellation scene, is, in this light, an ironic mimicry of the patients’ inability to escape their own flesh, including Marat, encased in the bath on account of his “cheese-like” infected skin. Derrida salutes Artaud’s vision of a theatre which “summons the totality of existence and no longer tolerates either the incidence of interpretation or the distinction between actor and author,” a theatre that concentrates on removing the *différence* of the body and its Other⁵³⁷ by simply being about the body-in-its-existence. But performance is intrinsically framed by the limits of the body as a representational tool and as a metaphorical one, metaphorical in the sense of transmitting one sense into another: the affective communication between bodies is always a form of metaphor. We can interpret Brook’s extensive use of bodies as

⁵³⁵ Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” in *Writing and Difference*, 175.

⁵³⁶ Artaud, “No More Masterpieces,” *The Theater and Its Double*, 80.

⁵³⁷ Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” in *Writing and Difference*, 187.

performance instruments and of the metaphorical bodily fluids (paint as blood) as a plague-like eruption of corporeal penetrability. Just as Artaud had to rely upon written texts to propagate his post-dramatic theatre, though, the body is also the limiting factor in the Theatre of Cruelty's sensory revolution. Freddie Rokem reminds us of the intrinsic historical signification of the performing body in his *Performing History*, in which he describes the actor as a "hyper-historian" and points out that there are "aesthetic potentials of the actor's body as well as emotional and ideological commitments [which] are utilized as aesthetic materials through different kinds of embodiment and inscription."⁵³⁸

The actors—who are embodying asylum-inmate-actors—who are re-creating the French Revolution—are then, alternatively, inscribed as Brechtian presenters of material historical conditions. For *Marat/Sade* was also a textually-rich drama, produced for the mainstream legitimate theatre, and recognizable in its debt to the traditions of the historic avant-garde, most notably Artaud and Brecht. But the tension between the dialectical materialism of Brecht and the embodied plague of Artaud makes it a provocative example of the re-articulation of the historical avant-garde in the early 1960s that the historical and critical analyses of the preceding chapters have shown. In putting Brecht and Artaud into dialogue with each other, Brook's production of *Marat/Sade* was "able to both actualize and historicize the avantgarde's program," as David Roberts has put it.⁵³⁹ Roberts argues that the play exemplifies "the birth of postmodernism from the spirit of the avant-garde" by perpetually suspecting a critical dialectic within self-reflection: "*Marat/Sade* is the new stage of postmodernism: the paradoxical presence of the past, the unfinished history contained within the institution, which poses once again the question of the ends and the end of

⁵³⁸ Rokem, *Performing History*, 13.

⁵³⁹ Roberts, "*Marat/Sade*, or the Birth of Postmodernism," 126.

art in a rich and explosive act of self-criticism.”⁵⁴⁰ Eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century historical-political discourses collapse together into a history of the present—that is, the Cold War moment of the early 1960s, characterized by militaristic antagonism between ideologically opposed superpowers.⁵⁴¹

Susan Sontag, who served as a particularly important mediator between a European re-assessment of various historical artistic legacies and the American development of post-modernist artistic production, strongly appreciated the Artaudian qualities of Brook’s production, and she claimed to have seen the stage production a total of twelve times, three in London and nine in New York.⁵⁴² In the essay “Marat/Sade/Artaud,” included in *Against Interpretation* after originally appearing in the Spring 1965 issue of *Partisan Review*, Sontag’s connects the experience of the performance to Artaud’s manifesto for a theatrical experience of pure sensuousness, an all-powerful aesthetic, in the original sense of the word. Its setting in an insane asylum, in this view, is key to the spectacle of Artaud’s plague-like theatre, a theatre that is “a religious and metaphysical idea but in the sense of the magical, real and absolutely effective action.”⁵⁴³

Sontag also describes the performance of insanity and revolution with adjectives of joy and bacchanalian pleasure. The Four Singers “sing sardonic loony songs,” and there are also “brilliant bits of acting-out performed by the lunatics, the most forceful of which is a mass guillotining sequence, in which some inmates make metallic rasping noises, bang together parts of the ingenious set, and pour buckets of paint (blood) down drains, while other madmen gleefully jump into a pit in the center

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁴¹ How the historical discourse of Marxism and miscarried revolution would resonate in a twenty-first-century production is, alas, a question for another study...

⁵⁴² Susan Sontag, typed letter to Peter Brook, dated February 25, 1967 (Susan Sontag Papers).

⁵⁴³ Artaud, “The Theatre I’m About to Set Up,” in *Artaud on Theatre*, 73.

of the stage, leaving their heads piled above stage level, next to the guillotine.”⁵⁴⁴ As we saw in chapter one, the relationship between comedy and the impelled affect of ritual performance was also considered in Sontag’s theorization of the “new sensibility” of First World late capitalism. In her 1965 essay “On Style,” in which she argues for an aesthetic critique based on sensual aesthetics rather than form, she argues that a work of art “needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable.”⁵⁴⁵ This ineffability of aesthetic perception is further theorized in her 1965 essay on “One culture and the new sensibility,” in which she argues in favor of a contemporary cultural sensibility that encourages aesthetic vitality as a valid form of humanistic commitment. According to Sontag’s mid-1960s cultural appraisals, a sensory reaction to moral dilemmas is a timely perspective: “What other response than anguish, followed by anesthesia and then by wit and the elevating of intelligence over sentiment, is possible as a response to the social disorder and mass atrocities of our time,” she asks rhetorically.⁵⁴⁶ This progression of aesthetic responses is strong evidence that explains Sontag’s affinity for the Brook production of *Marat/Sade*. At the same time, the performance was recognized as more than a performance of trendy aesthetic shock, like the Happenings on which Sontag also commented.

A driving force behind Sontag’s project as a cultural critic was to re-awaken political consciousness through the ethical awareness effected by an aesthetic impact.⁵⁴⁷ In her analysis of *Marat/Sade*, Sontag writes:

⁵⁴⁴ Sontag, “Marat/Sade/Artaud,” in *Against Interpretation*, 164.

⁵⁴⁵ Sontag, “On Style,” in *Against Interpretation*, 36.

⁵⁴⁶ Sontag, “One culture and the new sensibility,” in *Against Interpretation*, 301.

⁵⁴⁷ The connection between aesthetics and ethics remained the prime motivator for all of Sontag’s projects, becoming most overt in her later writings on photography, illness, and the act of reading. See the “Theories and Methodologies” section of *PMLA* 120.3 (May 2005), pp. 822-842, for various reflections on this theme in Sontag’s work.

There is a moral vision in art like Marat/Sade, though clearly it cannot (and this has made its audience uncomfortable) be summed up with the slogans of ‘humanism.’ But ‘humanism’ is not identical with morality. Precisely, art like Marat/Sade entails a rejection of ‘humanism,’ of the task of moralizing the world and thereby refusing to acknowledge the ‘crimes’ of which Sade speaks.⁵⁴⁸

This provocatively implies (provocative in a time of Cold War “containing” binaries) that the human capacity for aesthetic perception, violence, and social contracts is irreducible to one political evaluation. The Artaudian embodiment of the play and chance inherent in human physical interaction re-calibrated the moral vision of the political material, impelling the audience to sense the dangers of any rigid adherence to political dogma. The cruelty of Artaud’s visionary theatre, and what Sontag sensed in Brook’s production, lies in the connection between the aesthetic with the ethic, in its condemnation of a humanistic Enlightenment discourse that limits the terms of its own moral judgment by separating political abstractions from physical experience—the same limitation, in fact, that inspired Karl Marx’s intervention in political philosophy. The Marxist political debate between Marat and Sade was a Brechtian performance of the dialectics of history, an open-ended dialectic that refused to supply a finished political resolution.

Reception History as Cultural Commentary

And so, ultimately, we must consider the public reception of the Brook production. The London press instantly lauded the production, although the critical response focused more on the visceral impact of the production than on the political debate of the drama. The *Guardian* reviewer appreciated the experience of the play as a dialogue between the cognitive and aesthetic faculties, describing it as “a deadly insane charade which as it approaches moments of meaninglessness becomes the most

⁵⁴⁸ Sontag, “Marat/Sade/Artaud,” in *Against Interpretation*, 171.

emphatically true and moving.”⁵⁴⁹ The *Times of London* review was equally equivocal on the subject of the production’s analytical vs. physical affect. Although suggesting that “[d]iscussions of the multiple references of the play could be indefinitely prolonged,” the review also opines that “on a first showing one is far less impressed by the intellectual line of the play than its impact on the visceral level.”⁵⁵⁰ Implicit in this assessment is the opinion that *Marat/Sade* is a spectacular event that warrants multiple viewings, an unquestionable boon to any theatre producer. The socialist *New Statesman* and the more conservative-leaning *Daily Mail* were equally admiring in their reviews, acknowledging that the play was a must-see, if for nothing else, on account of its ground-breaking spectacle. Bernard Levin in the *Mail* gushed over its “breadth, its totality, its breathtakingly rapid and varied use of every imaginable technique, dramatic device, stage-picture, form of movement, speech and song,”⁵⁵¹ while Ronald Bryden in the *New Statesman* described the mise-en-scène as “a living Géricault: a dungeon of bleached, fantastic ghosts of sanity mopping and mowing round the waxy tableau of death in cold water.”⁵⁵² This fascination with the visual effect of the production affirms its power as a spectacle with visceral effect, an effect that moreover insinuates ethical bemusement. Géricault was a highly influential, Académie-exhibited Romantic artist who also ventured into a form of “shock art” in his etchings and paintings of the mentally ill and severed heads and limbs, visiting asylums and prisons to draw “on site” studies. The artistic

⁵⁴⁹ Gerard Fay, Review of *Marat/Sade* (*The Guardian*, August 21, 1964), in *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 150.

⁵⁵⁰ [Review of *Marat/Sade*] *The Times of London*, August 21, 1964, in *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 151.

⁵⁵¹ Bernard Levin, Review of *Marat/Sade* (*The Daily Mail*, August 21, 1964), in *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 153.

⁵⁵² Ronald Bryden, Review of *Marat/Sade* (*The New Statesman*, September 4, 1964), in *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. Elsom, 152.

representation of social discipline and the abject human body made a notably strong impression on the British reviewers.

In New York, the production sparked a flurry of press, especially in the *New York Times*, which had followed the production since its London premiere. The New York critics, interestingly, reflected more on the political force of the (unresolved) debate and its strong ethical implications than did their London counterparts. In his review, Harold Taubman championed the play, promoting it for both its affective and its intellectual power: “In the end one is involved as one stands apart; one thinks when one should feel and feels when one should think...It may put you off at times with its apparent absurdity, or it may shock you with its allusions to violence and naked emotions. But it will not leave you untouched.”⁵⁵³ Two weeks later, Irving Drutman wrote an article in the *Times* debating how much of the production should be credited to Brook and how much is Weiss’s creation alone (“...Was Peter Brook Its Brain” appeared in the January 9, 1966 edition). Also in the January 9, 1966 issue of the *Times* appeared a more thorough analysis of the play by Stanley Kauffman, who wrote an article breaking down the philosophical and aesthetic conflicts of the play, which are rooted, in his opinion, in the “two theatrical philosophies...There is fundamental discord between the social Brecht method and the instinctual Artaud approach, between straightforward ironic vigor and the flickerings of the unnamed and unnameable.”⁵⁵⁴ A couple of months later, Martin Esslin chimed in as well, contributing a longer article explaining for the *Times* readers the concept of the “Theatre of Cruelty” and its centrality to the *Marat/Sade* (“The Theater of Cruelty” appeared in the March 6, 1966 issue of the *New York Times*). The amount of columns devoted to the play in America’s largest newspaper continued, with a review of the

⁵⁵³ Taubman, “Theater: The Assassination of Marat,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1965.

⁵⁵⁴ Kauffman, “The Provocative ‘Marat/Sade’...,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1966.

sound recording of the play in April 1966 and, of course, a review of Brook's 1967 film version of the production, which attempts the same situational effect of the live performance, but cannot recompense for the all-encompassing *Spielraum* of the play.

The carnivalesque world of the play was noted by many reviewers, who seemed overwhelmed by their own sensory engagement with the play. Bryden of the *New Stateman* described it as an "image [which] turns like a carousel," while the *Times of London* made a special note of the "trio [sic] of deranged commedia dell-arte singers." A clear political or philosophical message, however, was less discernible. Instead, the reviews themselves became philosophical debates, pondering the ultimate lesson to be learned from the cruel execution of an Enlightenment dialogue on revolution, human will, and political authority. It is impossible to say whether or not every audience member—or critic—recognized and understood the details of the internal struggle to revise Marxist theory; or whether they consciously reflected on the meta-position they held as bourgeois consumers of an ethical struggle. Ward Lewis, surveying sixteen different reviews and reports of the production in a study of the American reception, narrows down three different receptive responses: the first "confined itself to appreciation of Brook's effects and some of the lines without any recognition of the political or philosophical issues posed by Weiss."⁵⁵⁵ The other two levels of response that Lewis suggests were 2) perceiving that there was a philosophical debate, but not really defining it; and 3) recognition of the two political positions, but dismissing the production then as merely "theatrical" because it does not offer a resolution of the two positions.⁵⁵⁶ Lewis's analysis, however, does not consider the socio-political statement inherent in this unresolved dialogue between the production and its spectators. "Members of the audience applauded their favorite

⁵⁵⁵ Lewis, "The American Reception of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*," *Maske und Kothern* (1985), 68.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

ideas,” he describes, “wavering when the lunatics on stage clapped louder.”⁵⁵⁷

Through its visceral impact of spectacle, the production effected political and ethical dialogue on both sides of the Atlantic, through its popularity and equivocal political commitment. This inability to distill a clear political lesson from the play is, I would like to argue, subtle proof of its worth as a dialectical tool, and evidence that the production was an important example of successful Brechtian theatre that, I have argued, began to appear in the mainstream theatres of New York and London at this time.

Incidentally, the London reception was also noteworthy for the contemporaneous controversy that ensued after a trustee of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Emile Littler, attacked artistic director Peter Hall in print on the grounds that Hall had allowed “dirty plays” to sully the RSC. Brook’s *Marat/Sade*, produced as part of the RSC’s 1964-1965 season, was the lynchpin of Littler’s protest. “This London season is a disgrace,” Littler was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*; “As a governor of the Royal Shakespeare Company and a member of the executive [committee] I have dissociated myself from this programme of dirt plays at the Aldwych. These plays do not belong, or should not, to the Royal Shakespeare. They are entirely out of keeping with our public image and with having the Queen as our Patron.”⁵⁵⁸ Unwittingly, Littler’s protest—on the grounds that the RSC has a public image intrinsically connected with the Queen of England—enabled the production itself, as an event, to become a mirror spectacle of the play. While by the early 1960s the Royal Shakespeare Company might have deemed it permissible to interpolate a little Brecht into Shakespeare,⁵⁵⁹ an incorporation of the contemporaneous Artaudian

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵⁸ Interview with Emile Littler (*Daily Telegraph* August 25, 1964) as quoted in Elsom, ed., *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, 154.

⁵⁵⁹ Such as William Gaskill’s productions of *Richard III* and *Cymbeline* in 1961-1962. Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 58.

sensibility into a Brechtian dialectical history play was outside the realm of monarchical representation. Apparently an aesthetic expression of the physical effects of subjugation and a failed revolution was a bit too much for some representatives of the Royal theatre, a bourgeois social apparatus operating under the aegis of a democratic-constitutional monarch. Littler's protests were a deliciously meta-theatric echo of Coulmier's disturbed protestation: "Do we have to listen to this sort of thing/ We're citizens of a new enlightened age" (43).

Conclusion

The production's phenomenological dialogue with historical presence unfolds in another realm as well, that of the haunted stage. Although unknown most likely to most theatre-goers, the presence of Antonin Artaud as both an asylum inmate and as a surrogate for Jean-Paul Marat haunts the unfolding presentation. Not only was Artaud a chronic mental health patient in asylums, he also, strangely enough, performed the role of Marat in Abel Gance's 1929 silent epic *Napoléon*. Artaud's wild-eyed revolutionary haunts the future emperor in a particularly striking scene, in which the young general goes to the dark, empty Assembly to seek guidance from the spirits of his Revolutionary leaders: Danton, Robespierre, Desmoulins, and Marat. The spiritual transmission (and transmutation) of revolutionary ideologies among these cinematic ghosts of history adds an cinematic eerie layer of "restored behavior," so to speak, of Weiss's metatheatrical creation.

In the 1966 *TDR* interview with Erika Munk, Weiss compares film to theatre, claiming that although he had indeed worked in film for sometime, he always felt something was lacking there that he subsequently found by working in the theatre. "Film seemed two-dimensional, a reproduction of an action, while theatre was closer to the direct action itself," he says.⁵⁶⁰ Although later in the interview he professes his

⁵⁶⁰ Munk, "An Interview with Peter Weiss," *TDR*, 106.

closer affiliation with Brecht's approach to theatre as opposed to Artaud, Weiss's appreciation of the phenomenological status of the theatre is a visceral sentiment akin to that of Artaud, and simultaneously uttered in a Brechtian spirit of commitment. "[In the theatre] I know I'm living in a living world, which can be changed, in which a man can work," he pronounces at the conclusion of the interview.⁵⁶¹ Susan Sontag, a sophisticated film critic and also, as mentioned above, a devoted fan of the Brook production, was equivocal in her reaction to the play transferred to film, writing Brook: "I minded being made to look at one thing only, when I remembered what else I had been able to look at at that moment, simultaneously. Sometimes I wished you had just filmed the play and let it go at that."⁵⁶² She also noted the impossibility of transferring the final experience of the play to the film: whereas the audience of Weiss's (and de Sade's) work receives grim, reciprocal applause from the players at the end, the film can only abruptly cut us off from the violent dénouement of de Sade's production via the credits. Most importantly, the performance of the play in the theatre impelled live participation on the part of the West End and Broadway spectators, who were thrust into a live, unstable world of political carnival, a impossible phenomenon with the film.

In conclusion, Brook's theatrical production of Weiss's *Marat/Sade* is, like *Oh What a Lovely War*, another key legacy of the transformation that occurred in the mainstream Anglo-American theatre in the first half of the 1960s. The incorporation of Brechtian techniques on the part of American and British theatre-makers was part of a changing, but historically informed, urge to challenge the relationship between artistic endeavor and political reality. The successful Anglo-American political theatre of this time, I am arguing, was not that which endeavored to resurrect and

⁵⁶¹ Ibid, 114.

⁵⁶² Susan Sontag to Peter Brook, copy of written letter dated February 15, 1967 (Susan Sontag Papers).

recreate Brecht's own theatre-work, but rather that which re-imagined Brecht's theories of historical materialism and the dialectic of comedy and contradiction within a new theatre realm and socio-political-historical context. In his attempt to integrate his concepts of "holy" and "rough" theatre, Brook muses that "If the holy is the yearning for the invisible through its visible incarnations, the rough also is a dynamic stab at a certain ideal."⁵⁶³ The roughness of the rough theatre is its tough, unwavering stare at players with feet of clay, a concreteness of human vulnerability that drives the rhetorical material. The holy theatre, which Brook accessed through an adaptation of Artaud's theatrical manifesto, evinces the human body's physical (and mental) vulnerability to the powers of political ideology. In his contemporaneous re-assessment of Artaud, Jacques Derrida suggested that the Theatre of Cruelty "is less a question of constructing a mute stage than of constructing a stage whose clamor has not yet been pacified into words."⁵⁶⁴ Brook's production of *Marat/Sade* harnessed the materialist Brechtian dialectic to the inchoate, impatient clamor of human subjugation, turning a socio-political critique into a visceral, aesthetic impact. *Marat/Sade*, combining clowning improvisation with physical torture in the process of writing history, suggested the topsy-turvydom of a play-world in which there is no opt-out option.

⁵⁶³ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 71.

⁵⁶⁴ Derrida, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, 240.

CONCLUSION

Historian Alf Louvre, analyzing the growth of radical political activism in Britain and the U.S. as the 1960s drew on, writes:

[i]f the era to the early 1960s saw the ‘end of ideology,’ then the Vietnam years were the age of ideology, when the grand consensus and the assumptions underlying it were destroyed. Economic, social, political and moral conflicts resurfaced so dramatically that the notion of frictionless social progress under beneficent capitalism simply appeared absurd.⁵⁶⁵

As I hope to have demonstrated, the absurdity of “frictionless social progress,” not to mention “grand consensus” and containment liberalism, had been the target of increasing satire in mainstream theatrical entertainment through the decade. In the new age of Cold War superpowers and American economic hegemony, performance and visual artists, theatre practitioners, and filmmakers seized upon the avant-garde as a discursive realm in which to critique political and social hegemonies through aesthetic provocation. The formal legacy of the modernist, “historical” (as Peter Bürger theorized it) avant-garde was thus recuperated and “Americanized” by Pop artists, abstract expressionist painters and composers, Greenwich Village performance artists, and experimental political theatre companies such as the Living Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. This adaptation and release of avant-garde aggression and production is, however, a symptom of what Paul Mann calls the “endgame” of the avant-garde: “The death of the avant-garde is its theory and the theory of the avant-garde is its death.”⁵⁶⁶ The May 1969 *Esquire* cover article on “The Final Decline and Total Collapse of the American Avant-Garde” is popular proof of the death-process of the avant-garde: describing the critic who “fairly bumbles with joy as [Living Theatre’s Julian Beck and Judith Malina] tell about how their theatre is helping to bring about the revolution,” the writer observes that “[w]hat has happened

⁵⁶⁵ Louvre, “The new radicalism,” in *Cultural Revolution?*, 57.

⁵⁶⁶ Mann, *Theory/Death of the Avant-Garde*, 3.

is that in the past few years the media have developed an insatiable appetite for this kind of material...To a public which has become acclimated to the idea of permanent cultural revolution, going out to make a revolution is something like going out to buy that revolutionary new detergent, Total Pure.”⁵⁶⁷

This transition from the perceptual structure of containment, as Bruce McConachie has described it, to the insatiable appetite for “permanent revolution,” as a form of entertainment, is the emergence of postmodernism in the 1960s.⁵⁶⁸ The emergence of what came to be called postmodern art and critique is also a symptom of the moral and political aporias of affluence. American Leslie Fiedler, while critiquing the banality of “middlebrow” culture, gives us an early symptom of the ambivalence that this affluence would evoke in cultural critics, admitting that to “declare oneself against ‘the Americanization of culture’ is meaningless unless one is set resolutely against industrialization and mass education.”⁵⁶⁹ As the foregoing analysis has shown, the potential for political critique within the popular Anglo-American theatre—a performance culture for the affluent—was not impossible, but it necessitated a re-imagining of the discourse of performance. The disparate theatre theories of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud become touchstones for performance creators and critics who sought new aesthetic forms of intellectual provocation and gripping entertainment. Contemporary theatre scholar Baz Kershaw, in *The Radical in Performance*, makes a direct connection between Brecht’s role in muddying the dichotomous aesthetics of the Cold War and the polyhedral postmodern worldview, locating this phenomenon as being “Between Brecht and Baudrillard.” Celebrating Brecht’s indisputable influence upon performance as a socially generative medium, Kershaw also analyzes performance through the de-centering lens of the postmodern

⁵⁶⁷ *Esquire*, “The Final Decline and Total Collapse of the American Avant-Garde,” May 1969.

⁵⁶⁸ Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” in *The 60s Without Apology*.

⁵⁶⁹ Fiedler, “The Middle Against Both Ends,” in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, Vol. II*.

sensibility.⁵⁷⁰ The performing arts can be seen as emancipatory, moreover, not by creating sociocultural unity, but rather by shattering the myth of unity and opening up the contingencies of experience and communication to an irreducible flux.

An important facet of the shift to postmodern interpretations is a dominance of a comic sensibility. The dynamics of comedy arise in subtle variations in the philosophical and cultural critiques of the period, from Derrida's and Deleuze's investigations of a Nietzschean eternal return, to which laughter is an essential reaction; to Marshall McLuhan's supposition that the "cool" expression for a "hot" culture is humor and play; to theatre critics such as Eric Bentley and Robert Brustein, who, in a 1966 commentary in the *New York Times*, called for a theatre of the times that is "superb, gay, and wild."⁵⁷¹ Ironic humor is a key facet to the successful postmodern recuperation of the historic avant-garde, as Susan Sontag discerned in her essays of cultural criticism, collected in *Against Interpretation*.

The unapologetically mainstream status of theatre productions on Broadway and the West End made the recuperation of the avant-garde an obvious "endgame." "It is as much, if not more, determined by the historical experiences of fascism, Stalinism, and post-war capitalism which made the Brechtian and Artaudian solutions alone increasingly unsatisfactory," Andreas Huyssen writes. "At the same time, it was precisely the attempt to re-write the parameters of avant-gardism which makes their work representative for an age which has since then come to be called postmodern."⁵⁷² The location of a Brechtian dialectical theatre in the Anglo-American realm of commercial production was a corresponding irony that, I argue, was critically important due to its very success. As Elizabeth Wright points out in her assessment of Brecht's role in an era of postmodern production, "Brecht knew as well as Adorno that

⁵⁷⁰ Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*.

⁵⁷¹ Brustein, "A Critic Calls for—" *The New York Times*, September 25, 1966.

⁵⁷² Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 116.

the materials with which he worked were contaminated by those who owned the means of production, but he never ceased to try ways of dialectically transforming them in the effort to turn them from capitalist tools into tools for human emancipation.”⁵⁷³ The Brechtian dialectical theatre takes as its main starting point a (comic) critique of history as “frictionless,” or, for that matter, as “progress.” In the first half of the decade, the plays *Oh What a Lovely War* and *Marat/Sade* succeeded at attracting audiences on the West End and on Broadway and provoking critical discussion about political action and reaction. Moreover, the inherent theatricality of these productions was key to their success. While Brecht’s own dramas and Brechtian theatre theory were liable to rigid reductionism, Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop, and Peter Brook and the Royal Shakespeare Company worked through a dialectical performance of history while keeping the integrity of artistic innovation and entertainment.

We might also consider other historically pertinent productions that correspond in different ways with this intersection of a Brechtian comic dialectic of history and an Artaudian expression of absurd cruelty. The works often lumped together as the “Theatre of the Absurd,” those of Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, LeRoi Jones, and Harold Pinter, were also instrumental in infusing the mainstream Anglo-American theatre with ironic treatments of socio-political critique. Productions such as John Osborne’s *The Entertainer* (1957 at the Royal Court) and Rosalyn Drexler’s *Home Movies* (1964 off-off-Broadway, at the Judson Memorial Church) are other examples of Brechtian political/comic theatre, plays that were specific however to their English and American audiences, respectively. The growing dominance of political satire in Anglo-American culture in general is apparent in other

⁵⁷³ Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 88.

media by the mid-to-late-1960s, especially the television successes of *The Smothers Brothers*, *That Was the Week That Was*, and *Laugh-In*.

It is my intention that this historical study enhance our understanding of British and American theatre history of the 1960s, revealing the importance of the Broadway and West End theatres as ironic humor became the dominant mode of political, historical, and social critique. The legacy of the 1960s shift in mainstream theatre took a hard turn to the left in the British context: in a 2007 article in *The Observer*, journalist Jay Rayner digs into the London theatre scene in search, ironically, of a “right-wing” theatre, for he bemoans the fact that for at least the past 20 years, British theatre has been “a nightly diet of obvious, predictable left-wing drama which preached to an audience of converts.”⁵⁷⁴ In many ways, the terms of the discussion remain the same in New York as well 45 years later: two different articles in the *New York Times* in 2005 presented bemused analyses of what it means to be “avant-garde” in the contemporary theatre, one offering a primer on how to “appreciate” avant-garde performance, the other reassuring readers that “the avant-garde’s reputation for humorlessness has always been something of a bum rap...What many Off Off Broadway shows are offering is actually a very accessible commercial entertainment in the wrapping of an experimental theater piece.”⁵⁷⁵ While the viability of incisive satire in the mainstream theatres is still more precarious than in the smaller venues, the writer argues that the mainstream-feel of the non-Broadway productions is “not that surprising given that the old distinctions between Off Off Broadway...and the rest of the theater world have blurred.” The mandate of political satire to challenge hegemonic thinking has, perhaps, succumbed to the same endgame of the avant-garde, having reached its apogee in popular culture. It remains to be seen how the interlinked

⁵⁷⁴ Rayner, “Why is nobody doing the right thing?” *The Observer*, November 11, 2007.

⁵⁷⁵ Zinoman, “The Avant-Garde Goes to Clown School,” *New York Times* April 17, 2005. See also Jefferson, “The Avant-Garde, Rarely Love at First Sight,” *New York Times* July 8, 2005.

legacies of the historical avant-garde and postmodern comedy will continue to provoke and challenge our contemporary culture—one even more over-saturated than McLuhan could have imagined.

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