

THE BRECHTIAN DIMENSIONS OF MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Robert Potter

At first glance Bertolt Brecht and the religious drama of the Middle Ages would hardly seem to belong in the same sentence. Brecht after all was a confirmed atheist whose hard-edged twentieth century political theatre mocked Christian pieties. Yet when Janet Ritch spoke of Brecht and medieval drama at the 1998 SITM Colloquium in Odense, if only to make clear how antithetical they were, I felt compelled to note some fascinating links between Brecht's work and medieval theatre. We subsequently arranged to take a short detour from our SITM tour of medieval church paintings on the island of Funen, to visit the humble Danish barn in Skovsbostrand where Brecht had taken refuge from Hitler in 1933. With characteristic Brechtian irony, it turned out to be an elegant beachside cottage.

For Brecht and his family that cottage was only the first stop in a lengthy journey into exile from Germany that would last for fifteen years, crisscrossing the European continent as he attempted to sustain his theatrical ventures, one step ahead of the Nazi onslaught. The road led on to Sweden and Finland, then across the Soviet Union to Vladivostok and across the Pacific by ship to California, where Brecht joined the émigré community and failed as a Hollywood screenwriter. But in the process he managed to write a series of masterpieces that would establish him as a major world playwright,

director and dramatic theorist.¹ It was the impact of these works, and Brecht's revolutionary theories of theatrical practice, which would come to influence so strongly postwar world theatre in general, and the revivals of medieval drama in particular, in the last decades of the twentieth century.

What necessitated Brecht's exile from Germany, and motivated his most influential theatrical innovations, was a burning question of ideology. In the early years of the Weimar Republic he had gained a reputation as a bohemian poet, rebel and theatrical *enfant terrible*, producing works such as *Baal* and *The Threepenny Opera*, expressing a cynical and essentially nihilistic critique of contemporary society. In the aftermath of the world economic crisis of 1929 Brecht, like many others of his generation, was drawn to Marxism as an explanation for the downfall of the civilization, and a "scientific" solution to its problems, promising a new way forward. Brecht's acceptance of Marxism had the semblance of a religious conversion, and he was to remain a passionate Marxist (though only when convenient an avowed Communist) for the rest of his life.²

Here I want to emphasize that, for the artists and intellectuals of Brecht's era, Marxism can best be understood as a religious movement. Indeed it can plausibly be seen as an heretical offshoot of Christianity, sharing many of its prophetic features, including a

¹ Glendyr Sacks, "A Brecht calendar," *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. xviii-xxv.

² Brecht's conversion to Marxism can be dated to 1930, based on revisions to his earliest known *Lehrstück*, *Der Lindberghflug*. See Karl-Heinz Schoeps, "Brecht's *Lehrstücke*: A Laboratory for Epic and Dialectic Theater," *A Bertolt Brecht Reference Companion*, ed. Siegfried Mews (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 7.

revolutionary populism, a dualistic concept of the struggle between good and evil, and above all the vision of an end-time, “a world transformed” wherein “the meek shall inherit the earth.” Marx’s communist state and St. Augustine’s City of God promise afflicted humanity a similarly transformative utopia at the end of the road — on earth in one case, in heaven for the other.³

Seeking a theatrical analogue for Marxist revolutionary analysis and advocacy, Brecht rejected many of the conventions and traditions of Western theatre, including the physical barrier of the proscenium arch dividing audience and performers, traditional “dramatic” plot structures, psychological acting theories, and the whole notion of a theatre event as escapist entertainment, a “culinary” experience. Instead he proposed an “epic” theatre, emphasizing storytelling and aimed at stimulating thought in an audience, rather than emotional involvement. He sought to permit audiences to observe, take decisions, sift competing arguments and realize the possibilities of change, internally and in the world outside.⁴

The physical setting Brecht imagined for the new epic drama, developed in collaboration with the designer Casper Neher, dispensed with realistic scenery and emphasized a sparse empty space defined by the actor’s movements and “the objects that had a part in the play.”⁵ This break with the traditional “fourth wall” concept leads effectively to a return

³ Ben B. Helm, Theatre and Ideology (London, Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 60.

⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” Brecht on Theatre, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 37.

⁵ Brecht, “Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre,” Brecht on Theatre, p. 57.

to a medieval *platea et loca* notion of theatre space, where the setting consists of an undefined empty space, and such localities as are necessary to accommodate the play's events, where "Heaven, Hell, ancient Jerusalem, and a contemporary European village shared the playing space simultaneously."⁶

Interestingly enough, Brecht indicated, in describing and advocating epic theatre, that his innovation had theatrical roots in the religious drama of the Middle Ages. Writing in 1936, he made this connection explicit:

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theatre. Its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity bring it close to the old Asiatic theatre. Didactic tendencies are to be found in the medieval mystery plays and the classic Spanish theatre, and also in the theatre of the Jesuits.⁷

How much did Brecht actually know about medieval drama? The answer is difficult to determine, and he would not be the first writer to claim an exotic pedigree for a foundling or a bastard literary invention. But what is indisputable is that Brecht proceeded, in the early 1930's, to create (or re-create) a kind of Marxist religious drama for the twentieth century. He called it the *Lehrstück*, or "learning play."⁸

⁶ Sarah Bryant-Bertail, Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2000), p. 13.

⁷ Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," Brecht on Theatre, p. 76. In the original German, the phrase used is *mysterienspiel*, a standard generic term used in German drama studies. Bertolt Brecht Werk, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, vol. 22 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 116.

⁸ The term is sometimes mistranslated "didactic play," but Brecht's emphasis is clearly more on a collective learning process, rather than the traditional pedagogy of teacher: pupil.

The Flight of the Lindberghs, originally created with Elizabeth Hauptmann and Kurt Weill for the 1929 Baden Baden music festival, was “a kind of didactic cantata, with solos, chorus and scraps of acting.”⁹ In its first version, the work glorified the technological feat of Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight without drawing ideological conclusions. In later revisions, after Brecht’s conversion to Marxism, it presents Lindbergh as a multiple choral figure rather than an individual, and includes a section titled “ideology,” characterizing the flight as “the victory of the progressive (i.e., Marxist) over the primitive (capitalist) world view:

Disorder still reigns in the cities
Resulting from ignorance, which is god.
But the machines and the workers
Will fight it, and you too,
Should participate in
Fighting against what is primitive.¹⁰

The contentious reference to God was no accident. Like Bernard Shaw before him, Brecht the Marxist construed Christianity as the enemy of social progress, and God as a retrogressive myth. This was a common motif in the work of Marxist writers of Brecht’s era. “They did away with the concept of God in the political realm, but [were unable] to eradicate the concept of a deity from their lives and works.”¹¹

As Keith Dickson points out, Brecht had a lifelong obsession with religion, extending from his earliest days as a teenage writer to his classic dramatization of the clash between

⁹ John Willett, notes to “An Example of Paedagogics,” *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 33.

¹⁰ Schoeps, “Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*”, p. 72.

¹¹ Cynthia Stewart, “The Bitterness of Theism? Brecht, Tillich and the Protestant Principle,” *Christian Faith Seeking Historical Understanding* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997) p. 66.

science and religion in *The Life of Galileo*, perhaps his most famous work.¹² Eric Bentley makes the same point and connects this religious preoccupation directly with the development of the *Lehrstück*:

Obsessed with religion — a subject he could not keep away from for more than a few pages at a time—he often thought in terms of traditional religious abstractions. He wrote a *Dance of Death*... His “invention” the *Lehrstück* is a sort of Catholic morality play revised by a Marxist reader of Luther’s Bible.¹³

Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* had another neo-medieval dimension. They were intended primarily as learning experiences for the participants, “art for the producer rather than art for the consumer,” embodying the belief “that moral and political lessons could best be taught by participants in an actual performance.”¹⁴ This feature is strongly evident in Brecht’s second *Lehrstück*. *He Who Says Yes* (1930) again was written in collaboration with Hauptmann and Weill, this time for performance by Berlin school students. Adapted from a Japanese *Noh* drama, the play raises issues of individual and collective responsibility in a parable of the journey of a boy who joins a group of young people crossing a hazardous mountain pass. In a climactic and rather shocking scene, “the boy,” falls ill and is counseled by a chorus of students, and a teacher. They point out that the expedition would fail if they turn back, and urge the boy to agree to be left behind, so that

¹² “His very first play, completed when he was only fifteen, was an adaptation of the Judith story, and entitled *Die Bibel*.” Keith A. Dickson, Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 129.

¹³ Eric Bentley, introduction to Seven Plays by Bertolt Brecht (New York, 1961), p. xi.

¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “The German Drama: Pre-Hitler,” and Willett, notes to “An Example of Paedagogics,” Brecht on Theatre, pp. 80, 33.

they may continue. The boy agrees. Accordingly, his comrades hurl him into an abyss — an act the play endorses as “in accordance with necessity.”¹⁵

The lesson of individual sacrifice for the collective good is pure Marxism — yet to an ear familiar with medieval drama it bears an odd resemblance to the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*, particularly its stern moral lesson, delivered by the Doctor at the play’s conclusion:

Lo! Sovereyns and sorys, now have we schewyd
Thys solom story to gret and smale;
It ys good lernyng to lernd and lewyd...
For thys story schoyt əowe [her]
How we schuld kepe to owr po[we]re
Goddys commawmentys wythowt grochyng.

Trowe ye, sorys, and God sent an angel
And commawndyd əow əowre child to slayn,
Be əowre trowth ys ther ony of əow
That eyther wold groche or stryve therageyn?

How thyngke əe now, sorys, therby?
I trow ther be thre ore a fowr or moo...¹⁶

But Brecht’s Berlin school children evidently balked at the moral lesson of *He Who Says Yes*, and after discussions he rewrote the play later that year as *He Who Says No*, retaining the dramatic circumstances but changing the plot, so that the boy is saved after all (again, shades of *Abraham and Isaac*!) and taken back down the mountain by his

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *He Who Says Yes*, trans. Wolfgang Sauerlander, The Measures Taken and other Lehrstücke (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), p. 68.

¹⁶ Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments, ed. Norman David EETS s.s. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 56.

companions. The play becomes a demonstration of the necessity of taking collective responsibility for individual misfortune — again, good Marxist doctrine.¹⁷

Modern scholars and critics have too often overlooked the fact that medieval mystery plays were, in the first instance, collective devotional acts carried out by ordinary citizens, learning their roles and enacting them — and only secondarily a public performance for edification and entertainment of an audience. Pam King's important new book reminds us of this neglected and crucial dimension of medieval performance, which has fascinating parallels in the genesis of Brecht's *Lehrstücke*.¹⁸

Brecht's third work in this vein, *The Measures Taken*, returns with a vengeance to the theme of sacrifice for a cause. Written in collaboration with the composer Hanns Eisler, it would prove to be Brecht's most controversial and notorious work. The play is cast in the form of a trial: four Chinese agitators return from a mission reporting that they have killed one of their comrades. They relate the circumstances with a cold-bloodedness "which possesses a lasting power to disturb."¹⁹ The doomed figure, an idealist known only as "The Young Comrade," endangers the agitators' mission through a series of compassionate but ill-judged acts, spontaneous responses to instances of injustice. Ultimately, the agitators explain that they had no alternative but to kill him. In his final speech the Young Comrade agrees with their conclusions, consents to his own execution,

¹⁷ Brecht, *He Who Says No*, trans. Sauerlander, *The Measures Taken and other Lehrstücke*, pp. 73-79.

¹⁸ Pamela M. King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2006).

¹⁹ Albrecht Betz, *Hanns Eisler: Political Musician*, trans Bill Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 93-94.

and requests that his body be thrown into a chalk pit to avoid discovery: His offstage voice proclaims his higher motivation:

...In the interest of Communism
In agreement with the progress of the proletarian masses
Of all lands
Consenting to the revolutionizing of the world.²⁰

Interestingly enough, *The Measures Taken* is structurally modeled on a Christian oratorio, and Eisler's opening music quotes almost directly from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a work Brecht considered an example of epic theatre. The language of the text of this *Lehrstück* is notably poetic, heightened and liturgical, with echoes of the Lutheran Bible, and the final scene "The Burial" is strongly reminiscent of the passion of Jesus Christ.²¹ Yet the emotional power of the narrative is deliberately undercut, to emphasize the rational objectives and the ideological moral of the story. In furtherance of these objectives, the role of the Young Comrade is not designed to be played by a single actor, but rather shared among the four agitators, as they act out in their testimony the events leading to the Young Comrade's death and burial.

The Measures Taken was to have a troubled performance history. Its first Berlin production was cancelled by nervous producers (including the composer Paul Hindemith) because of its political content, over the protests of Brecht and Weill. Moved to another venue, its premiere took place at a well-received midnight performance in December 1930. But most reviews were hostile, for a variety of political and aesthetic reasons.

²⁰ Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, trans. Carl R. Mueller The Measures Taken and other Lehrstücke, p. 34.

²¹ Schoeps, "Brecht's *Lehrstücke*," pp. 77, 80.

Right-wing denunciations of its didacticism were predictably vicious. Less expectedly, the left-wing press also condemned *The Measures Taken* for its form and content, accusing the authors of “petty bourgeois intellectualism” and misrepresenting the Communist party as ruthless murderers.

Despite these critical brickbats, *The Measures Taken* continued to be produced, and denounced, up to the last days of the Weimar Republic. In January 1933, on the eve of the Nazi takeover, a performance in Erfurt was disrupted and closed down by the police, and its producers accused of high treason. The pro-Nazi press reported these events with glee, proclaiming, “It is high time that our theatres again become temples of true German art.”²²

Barely a month later, the morning after the Reichstag fire, Brecht and his Jewish actress wife Helene Weigel left Germany, to begin what would be fifteen years in exile. The *Lehrstück*, a characteristically visionary and political product of its times, was expiring along with the Weimar Republic. It had, after all, been predicated on Marxist assumptions of the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the victory of the working class. In Roswitha Mueller’s words. “The historical basis for the *Lehrstück* is a society in transition to socialism.”²³

²² Schoeps, “Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*,” p. 78. See also Reiner Steinweg “Die Äusserungen der Autoren zur Massnahme (Theoretische Texts)” Bertolt Brecht, Die Massnahme: Kritische Ausgabe mit einer Spielanleitung, ed. Reiner Steinweg (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).

²³ “Learning for a new society: the *Lehrstück*,” The Cambridge Companion to Brecht p. 82.

With the end of the socialist dream, or at least the harsh postponement of its realization, Brecht was compelled to pursue his goals of epic theatre in less familiar, less secure and definitely less optimistic circumstances. Intimations of this cultural environment may be seen in Brecht's final *Lehrstück*, *The Exception and the Rule* (1930-32). Another collaboration with Elizabeth Hauptmann based on an ancient Chinese play, *The Exception and the Rule* is a wry and even cynical depiction of the exploitation of a coolie by a Chinese merchant, desperately trying to stay ahead of his commercial competitors. At length, after many misadventures, the downtrodden coolie attempts to comfort his employer, by offering him a water bottle; the merchant misconstrues this act of kindness as a threat, and murders him. Put on trial, the merchant is exonerated by a panel of judges, who note that the coolie had every reason to try to kill him. The moral of the tale is "that a good deed, if it occurs, must necessarily be misconstrued in a society where the bad deed is the rule."²⁴ Before this *Lehrstück* could be produced in Germany, the Nazi takeover put an end to any such possibilities. In theme and epic structure, however, it looks forward to the major series of plays which Brecht would write in exile, as war threatened and then erupted across the European continent, and eventually the world.

The plays of Brecht's years in exile, written under constant financial and political pressures, far from the German-speaking theatre and with little hope of immediate production, were revolutionary both in form and content. Rejecting not merely the commercial norms of the "well-made play", but also the propagandistic Stalinist formulas of "socialist realism," he created a series of astonishing epic parables for the theatre,

²⁴ Karl-Heinz Schoeps, Bertolt Brecht (New York: Ungar, 1977), p. 182.

including *The Life of Galileo* (1938; revised 1945), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1940), *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944). Presentational and episodic in structure, punctuated by “estranging effects” (songs, scene titles, projected commentary and other visual effects) and populated by antiheroes, hypocrites, scoundrels and naïve victims, rather than conventional heroes and villains, these plays aimed at encouraging an alert audience’s critical analysis of the dramatic events, rather than traditional empathy for the characters. But wartime conditions made Brecht’s access to audiences of any sort infrequent and problematic at best. Toward the end of his Hollywood years he was able to collaborate with the actor Charles Laughton on an English language version of *The Life of Galileo*, which was staged in Los Angeles by the director Joseph Losey in July 1947. A few months later, in the lengthening shadow of the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism, Brecht was called before the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington, where his radical views and works were put under scrutiny.

As Peter Thomson points out, “‘Martyr’ was in Brecht’s armoury of pejorative terms.”²⁵ Instead, Brecht contrived a devious Brechtian drama. Presenting himself as a humble refugee poet and would-be screenwriter, he spoke softly and politely in a thick German accent. The inquisitors were deceived and even charmed by his testimony, but his infamous *lehrstück*, *The Measures Taken*, almost came back to haunt him. An aide to the committee read out a fragmentary F.B.I. summary of the play, including the scene in which the Young Comrade is sacrificed for the good of the Communist cause. Brecht

²⁵ “Brecht’s Lives,” *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, p. 23.

explained that this was a mistranslation; the original German version was completely different. This bumbling explanation evoked relieved laughter, and the committee excused Brecht with thanks for his forthright testimony, “You are a good example,” concluded committee chairman J. Parnell Thomas.²⁶ If Brecht emerged smiling from the hearing, it was because he had a plane ticket for Paris in his coat pocket. The next day he left for Europe, never to return to America.

By this time the Soviet-occupied portion of Germany was evolving into the so-called “German Democratic Republic” of East Germany, where Brecht had been offered a theatre to run, in Berlin. But characteristically he first settled for a year in Switzerland, negotiating with the East German authorities while obtaining an Austrian passport and setting up copyright for all of his plays and other works in Switzerland, assuring himself a continuing source of Western capitalistic revenue. Then and only then did he return to Berlin to establish the Berliner Ensemble, which quickly became one of the great theatres of postwar Europe. It was here, in collaboration with Helene Weigel, that Brecht created the landmark productions of his major plays. When the Berliner Ensemble began to tour to the West, to Amsterdam and Paris, the European theatre world of the 1950’s quickly came under Brechtian influence. While preparing his company for its first visit to London in 1956, Brecht fell ill and died at the age of 58. The subsequent tour of the Berliner Ensemble introduced English theatre to Brecht’s work, with an enormous impact that is still being felt, fifty years later.²⁷

²⁶ Bruce Cook, Brecht in Exile (New York: Holt, 1983), p. 146.

²⁷ See Janelle Reinelt, After Brecht: English Epic Theatre (Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1994).

These same postwar years, as it happened, also marked the flourishing of modern stage revivals of medieval drama in England. As part of the Festival of Britain celebrating the victorious end of World War Two, the York Cycle of mystery plays was performed for the first time since the Middle Ages in the City of York in 1951, with enormous success. To bring these ancient religious plays to the stage for a wide audience, attracting the general public while not offending the lingering Victorian sensibilities of the pious was a challenging task. It was thanks to E. Martin Browne, who had been producing religious plays in church settings since the 1930's, that the production achieved its objectives. Browne employed a production strategy emphasizing decorum, piety and the careful editing of texts to remove potentially offensive language and incidents.

Such modifications were understandable in an era when Blasphemy laws were still in force, and British theatre remained subject to strict censorship by the Lord Chamberlain. Presenting the figure of Jesus, let alone God, on the stage was still forbidden in modern plays. Thanks to personal connections, Browne was able to finesse these problems, and secure the agreement of church officials by appointing a local clergyman to prepare a carefully edited script. He banished offstage such scenes of violence as the scourging of Jesus, and limited the cast to “persons who sincerely believed in Christian doctrine.”²⁸

The plays were performed on a panoramic stage set in the ruins of a medieval Abbey— a far cry from the pageant wagons of the original York plays, but allowing for impressive crowd scenes enacted by the local populace, and “colorful medieval costumes modeled

²⁸ John R. Elliott Jr., Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 77.

on quattrocento paintings.”²⁹ The resulting production proved to be a remarkable success, with encouraging reviews from the national press and tickets scalped at exorbitant prices as far away as London. In this way the York Plays became a major tourist attraction, and a recurrent Festival event. Performances followed at three-year intervals in 1954 and again in 1957, with a seventeen year-old Judi Dench playing the Virgin Mary.

But enormous changes were in the air for British Theatre. 1956 had brought John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* to the London stage, with its vicious attack on the English class system, and also the enormously influential visit of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble. When the York Festival committee looked for a new professional director for its 1960 festival, to replace the retiring E. Martin Browne, they quickly encountered much more modernity than they had bargained for. Their first choice was Tyrone Guthrie, legendary Old Vic director and master showman, who refused to set the plays in the genteel Abbey ruins and insisted on the construction of a thrust-style semicircular amphitheatre. Rejecting this proposal, the York authorities settled on David Giles, of London’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, who proceeded to build for the 1960 production an anti-romantic towered structure fit for Pontius Pilate, obscuring the ruins, with the entrance to Hell depicted as a concentration camp-like gateway. As for the performance, it was, as John Elliott noted, in every way a rejection of E. Martin Browne’s decorous Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic:

If Pilate inspired the set, Bertolt Brecht inspired the acting style of the play. It was perhaps no accident that *The Good Person of Setzuan* ran

²⁹ Elliott, Playing God, p. 79.

concurrently with the mystery plays at the York Theatre Royal during the 1960 festival. The mysteries, Giles believed, as did Brecht himself, were a perfect example of epic drama, or in Giles' phrase "total theatre." Such theatre depended on distancing the audience from the play, and Giles' direction was full of the "alienation" techniques used by Brecht. Giles' God entered not in the picturesque central archway as he always had before, but casually at audience level...[and] turned his back to Adam and Eve during the temptation scene...During the Crucifixion the audience was...forced to watch not the face of the Savior but the crowd of common men and women who were crucifying him...quattrocento costumes were replaced by ones inspired by Bosch and Breughel —"clothes rather than costumes," as Giles called them.³⁰

The national critics, attuned to the changing theatrical times, generally applauded these innovations. But the local York audiences were infuriated, and attendance dropped off, amid demands to return the York Plays to their traditional format, under local control. Despite these protests, the York authorities entrusted the 1963 revival to another Londoner, Michael Croft of the National Youth Theatre. When he had to resign at the last moment for reasons of health, William Gaskill was appointed to fill the position.³¹

The choice could hardly have been more Brechtian. Gaskill, associate director of the National Theatre in London, by general agreement was the driving force in England for Brechtian theatre. A dynamic and influential director, he not merely championed Brechtian acting and directing methods but inspired a whole generation of Brecht-influenced British playwrights — David Hare, Caryl Churchill, Howard Brenton, Edward Bond and John McGrath, and many more.³²

³⁰ Elliott, Playing God pp. 88-89.

³¹ Elliott, Playing God, p. 90

³² Reinelt, After Brecht, pp. 12-16.

1963 was the year of Joan Littlewood's transgressive, Brecht-inspired musical satire of World War One, *Oh What a Lovely War*, a sensation at her fringe theatre in London's East End, and then a huge hit when it transferred to the West End. In the irreverent spirit of the times, Gaskill's approach to the plays of medieval York was radical and provocative. He decided that the plays should be

1/ didactic and non-realistic in style and 2/ completely modern in spirit, as they had been in the Middle Ages. They should, he felt, make the audience uncomfortable rather than quiescent and, like Brecht's plays aim not at emotional involvement but at intellectual scrutiny and moral commitment...the central scenes... were plays with unrelenting brutality. The massacre of the Innocents was stage for the first time. The nailing to the cross was unmasked... the soldiers grunted and sweated grotesquely as they stretched Christ's limbs to make them fit the wrongly bored holes.³³

The set, spare and unlocalized in a Brechtian (and medieval) style, was designed by John Bury, who that same year created the sets for the Royal Shakespeare Company's much-acclaimed Brechtian-influenced Shakespeare history cycle *The Wars of the Roses* at Stratford on Avon.

All the local critics, and many of their national colleagues, seem to have despised Gaskill and Bury's innovations in the York production. And despite a strong box office, many local audience members were vocally outraged:

One spectator poured his contempt on what he called "this non-emotional, non-acting, all-teaching, symbolic nonsense" and laid the blame on Brecht. Another objected to the fact that the part of Jesus was played by a "left-wing agnostic."³⁴

³³ Elliott, *Playing God*, pp. 90-91.

³⁴ From letters in the *York Evening Press*, July 5, 1963, quoted by Elliott, *Playing God*, p. 91.

This furor ended the Brechtian era at the York Festival. For the 1966 revival E. Martin Browne agreed to come out of retirement and stage the York plays in a traditional performance. But the connections of Brechtian theatre and the medieval mystery plays had proved to a significant degree theatrically exciting and promising, and they would be pursued with greater professionalism and extraordinary results in succeeding decades.

Most stage revivals of medieval plays today take place under academic auspices, or as community events with amateur performers. In many respects this is only appropriate, since the great majority of the plays were conceived and first performed as community expressions of faith and local tradition. As for academics, they have evidently been involved with such performances since the time of Chaucer's *Absalom*.

A professional production of an evening's worth of mystery plays, let alone a cycle, would have been difficult to imagine in the British commercial theatre of the 1950's (or the French, German, Italian or American theatres, for that matter). But the postwar spread of heavily subsidized national theatre companies across Europe, dedicated to expanding the repertory, reviving classics and nurturing theatrical experiment, created a new arena of possibilities. And a new generation of innovative Brechtian-inspired directors — Roger Planchon and Ariane Mnouchkine in France, Peter Stein and Heiner Müller in Germany, and Peter Brook, Peter Hall and William Gaskill in Britain — extended Brecht's influence into the revival of the classics.

It was out of these circumstances that perhaps the most important and widely acclaimed revival of medieval mystery plays unfolded, over more than a twenty-year period, at Britain's National Theatre. It began on Easter Saturday 1977 on the pavement outside the newly-opened National Theatre on London's South Bank, when a cast of five professional actors, led by a marching band, performed the York *Crucifixion*. "Perhaps madly, but as it turned out, unforgettably, we decided to preview this by a live open-air performance of the *Crucifixion* play only," wrote the director Bill Bryden. "I think everyone secretly hoped it would rain."³⁵

But the weather cleared, a huge crowd assembled, and a stark, deeply moving theatrical experience ensued, for actors and audience alike. Twelve days later *The Passion*, a compilation from the York and Towneley Cycles adapted by Tony Harrison, opened at the Cottesloe Theatre.

Bryden was a young Scottish director who learned his trade as William Gaskill's assistant at London's Royal Court Theatre. Harrison, a much-honored poet, was a Yorkshireman who had seen the York plays revival in the E. Martin Browne version, and found it "a perversion." Put off by the BBC elocution of the actors, and the expurgation of the text, Harrison imagined a performance that would be true to the York plays' popular roots and the original Yorkshire dialect. When Bryden proposed a production with a newly

³⁵ "A Random Journal on the Development of the National Theatre Production by Bill Bryden." The Making of the Mysteries (London: Channel Four Television, 1985) [p. 15.]

adapted text, Harrison replied “If it’s Christ on the Cross with a Northern accent, I’ll do it.”³⁶

Bryden and Harrison, both from working class backgrounds, responded to the mystery plays as popular art, and it was this ideal rather than Brechtian dialectics that motivated their artistic vision. Yet the production which they created, together with a team of topflight National Theatre actors and the designer William Dudley, was deeply Brechtian in its didactic energy, its egalitarian politics, its aesthetic simplicity and directness, and its systematic abolition of the barriers between performers and audience. A rousing town band — the excellent group Home Service— provided music. The trappings and banners of trade unions (a contemporary match for the original York craft guilds) turned the theatre into a kind of guildhall, with hints of the Christian Socialist antecedents of the British labor movement. Not merely did the actors address their audiences directly, but also mingled with them before and during the performance. As a “promenade” production, it moved its scenes in and around a standing audience, which moved with the action as virtual participants, as a further portion of the audience watched from seats in the Cottesloe’s upper level. The effect was to turn the audience into collaborators in the performance, rather than onlookers.

The *Passion* production had originally been scheduled for a short run at the Cottesloe in April 1977. But the enthusiastic critical and box office response led to a revival in

³⁶ Bryden, “A Random Journal”[pp. 7-8.] Harrison’s final script for *The Mysteries* would be published many years later, on the occasion of the first performance of the entire three-part work: Tony Harrison, *The Mysteries* (London: Faber, 1985).

September of that year, and a further revival the following August. In August 1980 *The Passion* was revived for a third time at the Edinburgh Festival, playing on alternate nights with a new collection of mystery plays entitled *The Nativity*. It began with the York *Creation* and led via Old Testament highlights (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and Abraham and Isaac) to the Annunciation and an extended Nativity sequence (including the classic Towneley *Second Shepherds Play*).

The Edinburgh venue was the historic Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland, which had been the scene of another landmark medieval theatre revival, Tyrone Guthrie's 1948 production of David Lindsay's *A Satire of the Three Estates*. The striking scene of the Creation began as the audience encountered a group of contemporary workmen (miners, bus conductors, construction workers), one of whom:

Brian Glover, ascended on of all things, a forklift truck...an egg-bald God, creating the world in a thick Yorkshire accent...'Ego sum alpha et omega,' he declared to the milling spectators below and then, with a hint of exasperation lest we had missed the point, 'Nowt is but I'.³⁷

A huge success in Edinburgh, this tandem presentation of *The Nativity* and *The Passion* moved on to London in September for an engagement in the Cottesloe, then on to a further Christmas revival and a tour of Germany and Italy in 1981.

In 1985 Harrison and Bryden added a dazzling finale to the production, a third evening-long segment entitled *Doomsday*. It led from a wild Harrowing of Hell to a magic-trick Resurrection, an often-comical Appearances of Jesus to his Disciples, an Ascension, a

³⁷ Bryden, "A Random Journal" [p. 23], and a subsequent review of the 1985 revival in London by Michael Ratcliffe, *The Observer*, January 28, 1985.

touching Marian sequence and a blockbuster Last Judgment including spectacular scenic effects and audience participation. Needless to say, *Doomsday* proved to be a great crowd-pleaser. The three portions were then assembled into a single three-part 12-hour performance called *The Mysteries*. The hard-eyed and often cynical London critics responded with some of the most astonished and rapturous reviews anyone could remember:

“A day of sheer exhilaration.”³⁸

“The result, for all present, was an unforgettable piece of communal theatre.”³⁹

“Celebrates the magnificent variance of God’s most complex creature, the common man.”⁴⁰

“The most moving, solemn and joyful event in the London theatre for a long time”⁴¹

“The presentation is endlessly and joyfully inventive.”⁴²

“In its blend of the ordinary and the extraordinary, of the tragic and the comic, and of the grossly supernatural, a major achievement of the National Theatre, of which we shall be reminiscing years hence.”⁴³

“The complete cycle represented an extraordinary experience. No wonder the end of it all saw an explosion of communal joyfulness, with everybody, actors, musicians, audience all cheering and clapping, singing and dancing.”⁴⁴

“An experience at once troubling, disorienting, irritating and ultimately cathartic. It should be seen through the length and breadth of the land.”⁴⁵

I was living and teaching in England that year, and I caught up with *The Mysteries* in three disconnected segments, at the Cottesloe and at the Lyceum Theatre in the West End, to which it transferred during one of the periodic political conflicts between the National Theatre management and the Margaret Thatcher government. So I can testify to

³⁸ Kenneth Hurren, Mail on Sunday, January 27, 1985.

³⁹ Michael Billington, Guardian, January 21, 1985.

⁴⁰ Ann McFerran, Time Out, January 24, 1985.

⁴¹ Michael Ratcliffe, The Observer, January 28, 1985.

⁴² Michael Coveney, Financial Times, January 21, 1985.

⁴³ John Barker, Daily Telegraph, January 21, 1985.

⁴⁴ Christopher Grier, Standard, January 21, 1985.

⁴⁵ Carole Woddis, City Limits, January 25, 1985.

the powerful political statement which the production made, refuting in its every action the Thatcherite claim that “there is no such thing as society.”

Indeed, as Sarah Beckwith points out, *The Mysteries* were created “during the time of the Miner’s Strike, in which Thatcher sought to break the back of England’s most powerful union. This battle was in the very heartland of South Yorkshire.”⁴⁶ A key detail in *The Mysteries* illustrates how closely the spirit of the production focused on this socio-political circumstance. As Beckwith notes, Harrison’s text interpolates into the Crucifixion play a speech by the Centurion, spoken by an actor in miner’s costume, with his miner’s lamp headgear illuminating the face of Jesus. Past and present are fused together in conscious anachronism. It was just such evocations of “Medieval Time and English Place” that made the performance such a memorably contemporary experience for its late twentieth century audience.⁴⁷

But I was surprised to find that the critics’ enthusiasm for *The Mysteries* (and my own) was not shared by a number of my colleagues in the world of medieval theatre studies. Partly that may have been a function of Bryden’s utter lack of interest in medieval “authenticity” — no pageant wagons, period costumes or Middle English texts, thank you very much! For others, it was an ideological matter. Meg Twycross, for example, acknowledged the formal connections between Brechtian and medieval staging, but

⁴⁶ Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 182.

⁴⁷ Beckwith, *Signifying God*, pp. 182-183. The phrase quoted is from V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*.

lamented the impossibility of recapturing the spirit of “community theatre” in a godless age:

Modern revivals have to face the fact not only that they cannot recapture this relationship, but that there is probably nothing that can substitute for it that will not do violence to or distort the plays’ premises. Thus the National Theatre’s *The Mysteries*...tried to draw on a spurious sense of community created by appeals to a romantic nineteenth-century trade unionism that never was, as a substitute for the religious fervour and knowledge that the director probably rightly felt had gone forever.⁴⁸

But it was also true that the very professionalism of the acting, lurking behind the working class disguises of boots, miners’ hats and bus conductors’ uniforms, carried these plays written for amateurs into a provocative and alienating theatrical dimension. For lack of a better term, let us call it a Brechtian dimension.

By the 1980’s, in any event, the genuine parallels between Brechtian and medieval stage conventions of presentational theatre had come to be more widely acknowledged. John Marshall drew useful connections between medieval religious and contemporary political theatre in the work of John McGrath’s 7:84 company, and praised *The Mysteries* “realization of the plays theatricality and brilliance to an extent perhaps not seen before in modern times.”⁴⁹ Coincidentally or not, scholarly articles began to appear in the wake of *The Mysteries*; the 1983 volume of the specialist journal *Medieval English Theatre*, for

⁴⁸ “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays,” The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 38. And see also p. 54, on Brecht and medieval staging.

⁴⁹ “Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays,” Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, pp. 292-295.

example, carried two back-to-back studies elucidating characterization in medieval drama with Brechtian terminology.⁵⁰

The 1985 revival of *The Mysteries* was by no means its finale. At Christmas that year, Channel Four Television broadcast a superb televised version of the entire production, shot on location in the Cottesloe Theatre with live audiences. It conveyed at least something of the magical experience of being in that audience and participating — “assisting” as the phrase goes, in French or Spanish— in the event. The television version, captured on video and made available around the world, assured that millions of viewers, most of whom knew nothing of medieval drama (or Bertolt Brecht, for that matter) came to share in the experience.

And the stage life of *The Mysteries* continued. The entire sequence was revived at the National Theatre in 1999, with many of the original cast participating. An American professional director friend of mine, a tough critic with little interest in medieval theatre, and little given to hyperbole, sent me this note from London in January 2000:

The Mysteries were arguably the 3 best of the 41 shows we saw in London...I've owned the video of these, but have never been able to watch it through. The camera simply cannot capture the experience. In the Cottesloe, this was terrific theatre!⁵¹

⁵⁰ David Mills, “Characterization in the English Mystery Cycles: A Critical Prologue,” *Medieval English Theatre* 5:1 (1983): 5-17; Sarah Carpenter, “Morality-Play Characters,” *Medieval English Theatre* 5:1 (1983) 18-28. And see also Donna S. Vinter, “Didactic Characterization: the Towneley *Abraham*,” *Comparative Drama* 14 (1980) 117-136.

⁵¹ Letter from Tom Markus, January 12, 2000.

So in the end, *The Mysteries* belong to the theatre, and indeed to the kind of theatre Bertolt Brecht would attempt to imagine into existence, during his itinerant, quizzical, devious and visionary lifetime:

How can the theatre be both instructive and entertaining? How can it be divorced from spiritual dope traffic and turned from a house of illusions to a house of experiences? How can the unfree, ignorant man of our century, with his thirst for freedom and his hunger for knowledge; how can the tortured and heroic, abused and ingenious, changeable and world-changing man of this great and ghastly century obtain his own theatre which will help him to master the world and himself?⁵²

University of California, Santa Barbara

⁵² Bertolt Brecht, "On Experimental Theatre" *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 135. This was the final quotation in my book *The English Morality Play* (London: Routledge, 1974) p. 245. The twentieth century has come and gone, and the questions Brecht raised in 1939 are still with us.