



Brecht für Theaterstudenten: Pädagogik des Epischen Theaters in einer Lehrveranstaltung zur Theaterstückanalyse

Der Autor dieses Artikels stellt Strategien vor, Brecht in einer Lehrveranstaltung zur Analyse von Theaterstücken für BA-Studenten im Fach Theater im ersten Jahr zu lehren. Die erste Hälfte dieses Unterrichts umfasst den Begriff Realismus sowie klassische Modelle der dramatischen Struktur. Brechts Werke werden im Kontext diverser Reaktionen gegen den Realismus im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert diskutiert und mit Stücken von Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill und Amiri Baraka verglichen. Der Autor behauptet, dass Film- und Video-Quellen den Theaterstudenten Brechts Werke zugänglicher machen können. Begriffe wie *Gestus* und *Verfremdungseffekt* sind durch Aufführungsexperimente und Schreibaufgaben erklärt.

In this article the author proposes strategies for teaching Brecht in a play analysis course for first-year undergraduate theater students. The first half of the course is devoted to realism and to classical models of dramatic structure. Brecht's works are discussed in the context of twentieth-century reactions against realism and are compared to plays by Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill, and Amiri Baraka. The author argues that film and video resources can make Brecht's work more accessible to theater students. Concepts of *Gestus* and *Verfremdungseffekt* are approached through experiments in staging and through writing exercises.

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## Brecht for Theater Majors: Teaching Epic Theater in a Play Analysis Course

Daniel Smith

As a faculty member in Theater Studies, I regularly teach Brecht's plays in both introductory and upper-level courses for undergraduate theater majors. This essay explores the strategies I have used for discussing *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*) in a play analysis course for first-year students, including the use of film and video, comparative study of Brecht in the context of modern drama, and proposals for Brechtian adaptations of realist plays. Ultimately Brecht's work serves as a lens for understanding multiple movements in twentieth-century theater, while providing students with tools for analyzing play texts from the perspectives of critic, dramaturg, actor, director, and designer.

### Learning Objectives

Many theater programs offer an introductory play analysis course for majors. Such courses are typically distinct from literary courses in the analysis of drama in that they position the dramatic text as the impetus for theatrical performance.<sup>1</sup> Methods for theatrical play analysis often begin with literary study of a play's structure, ultimately leading students to think about practical aspects of the script in production. While production history is also likely to be part of the study of dramatic texts, the most significant goal of many play analysis courses in US theater programs is to develop the student's creative capacity for understanding the artistic possibilities of a play script. In our department, this course is called Theatrical Play Analysis and focuses on how directors, designers, dramaturgs, actors, and other theater artists make choices for real and imagined productions of plays. This emphasis on practical considerations for production is emphasized in the catalogue description: "Play study in relation to theatrical production." An online version of the course is offered as an elective for non-majors and is structured primarily to develop students' critical capacities for analyzing production choices. Developing these critical capacities is also a goal of the face-to-face version of the course offered for majors, but the course for majors insists further on developing students' ability to use these critical frameworks to make creative decisions about play scripts.

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As part of a group of three courses intended to be taken by first-year theater majors at Michigan State University, Theatrical Play Analysis (THR 110) invites students to participate as citizens in departmental undergraduate programs. Our department is organized in three areas: Acting, Design, and Theater Studies. Each area is responsible for one introductory course in the major. Whether they intend to work toward the BA degree, the BFA in Acting, or the BFA in Design, students are required to take Acting I (THR 101) and Introduction to Technical Theater (THR 111), as well as Theatrical Play Analysis. Each of these courses draws on the department's production season to make new students part of the community. Students in the Technical Theater course work on crews for department productions, applying their classroom knowledge in a laboratory section. The Acting course requires students to audition for the next semester's shows (they may indicate that they do not wish to be cast). Theatrical Play Analysis requires students to view department productions and write about them. These activities give students the opportunity to engage with the artistic and academic community of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Because Play Analysis primarily enrolls first-year students, the course also tends to include some discussion of appropriate college-level work. Another important aspect of the Play Analysis course for majors is exposing students to a variety of texts from different periods and national traditions, although this survey coverage tends to be organized in terms of "style." The course begins with realism and classical models; Brecht is positioned as offering a challenge to realist modes and classical dramaturgy. Theater majors in our program, and in general, tend to be resistant to this challenge, as realism is the dominant mode in their acting classes. Brecht's theatricality stands in contrast to actor training based in American interpretations of Stanislavsky. Students who are aiming for acting careers in film and television tend to find Brecht especially jarring. Theater students also tend to be resistant to the length and episodic structure of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Because theater students are expected to have at least a passing acquaintance with Brecht as both playwright and director, I employ multiple strategies to break down this resistance. One significant teaching objective is thus to render Brecht accessible. A major learning objective is to understand how Brechtian theater works in performance. To this end, I introduce the concepts of epic theater, *Gestus*, and *Verfremdungseffekt* and I ask students to demonstrate these concepts by applying them. They should understand how Brecht's dramatic theories depart from realism, and how other theater artists have taken up Brechtian techniques.

The Learning Environment

Theatrical Play Analysis is a fifteen-week course that meets twice per week. Six class sessions directly touch on Brecht or Brechtian theater. The





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textbook used for this course is *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*, which includes John Willett's translation of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, as well as Brecht's short essay "The Street Scene," also in Willett's translation.² I also teach Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud 9* as part of our unit on Brechtian theater. Prior to this unit, students have studied a number of plays that are much more Aristotelian in their dramatic structure. Typically these include Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Euripides's *Medea*, Molière's *Tartuffe*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Because the textbook includes both *Trifles* and Glaspell's short story "A Jury of Her Peers," this play offers the possibility of discussing how drama is distinct from prose fiction. Discussions of *Medea* include emphasizing various possibilities for the role of the Chorus and for the final image of Medea departing on a chariot drawn by dragons. *Tartuffe* provides a lesson in practical aspects of casting; asked to work in groups to cast the play with famous actors, students quickly grasp that their different casting choices might lead to wildly different productions. In all cases, production photos and video help to show how theater artists have made particular choices about the script. *Theatre in Video* is an excellent resource for finding films and archival video of productions.

Methods of script analysis are taught using vocabulary that students will encounter in the department's courses later in the major and theater productions. Students read Aristotle's *Poetics* after having analyzed several plays using terminology derived from Freytag's Pyramid (exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, dénouement). Because the head of our Directing program is partial to deploying a Premise statement (in the form "X leads to Y") as an approach to production, students read Lajos Egri's work on Premise and write their own Premise statements for plays.³ Egri suggests the Premise statement both as a tool for analyzing plays written by others and as a guiding principle for aspiring playwrights. A Premise articulates a theme in a way that emphasizes active storytelling. Such a statement for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* might be "Love Leads to Mutual Destruction" or "Forbidden Love Leads to Familial Reconciliation." Students often take issue with Egri's tone and his choice of examples that are unfamiliar to them, particularly plays that were successful in the 1930s and 1940s but have fallen out of favor. Still, students tend to appreciate the Premise statement as a formula within which there is room for multiple interpretations. In their book on collaboration in the process of theatrical production, Rob Roznowski and Kirk Domer advocate the Premise statement as a powerful tool for facilitating theatrical collaboration among directors and designers.⁴ If all members of a production team can get on board with the same Premise for a play, then the production team will be working together to tell the same story. This vocabulary is crucial for students in our program, as they will encounter it in their theater production work within the department, especially when they work directly with Roznowski





or Domer. Thus, the Premise statement becomes a tool for helping students to become effective citizens in the department. Building on the notion of Premise, the course includes small-group mock production meetings where students take on roles as director and designers for a hypothetical production, and later present their ideas to the class as a whole.

A Plot-Bead Diagram offers another approach to play analysis that arises from literary studies and can offer a springboard for theatrical analysis. Many theater educators have embraced this technique, following the publication of a 2003 article by scholar and dramaturg Shelley Orr.⁵ A Plot-Bead Diagram involves drawing images to represent important events in the text, and linking the images together as though they are beads on a necklace. My primary goal in introducing the Plot-Bead Diagram is to help students work on thinking visually about plays. For example, my Plot-Bead Diagram for Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* focuses on objects that help Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters to understand the state of mind of Mrs. Wright, who has been jailed after the murder of her husband by strangulation. In the first circle I draw a broken jam jar; next a ragged quilt square; then a twisted birdcage; fourth, a bird with its neck wrung; and finally a woman's coat with a large pocket. This emphasis on the clues found by the women ties the play to the mystery genre and elucidates its structure. Exposition establishes a world of domesticity interrupted by violence. The climactic moment of recognition comes when the women find the dead bird and interpret this as evidence of a motive for Mrs. Wright to kill her husband. In the end, Mrs. Hale hides the clues in the pocket of her coat, a resolution suggesting that the women have judged the homicide to be justifiable. In practical terms, the Plot-Bead Diagram offers points of discussion about scenic design, props design, and costume design. Thus, students who plan to focus on design tend to respond especially well to this exercise.

Two larger assignments encourage students to think creatively and practically about theater production. First, students design a publicity poster for one play that we have studied together in order to demonstrate a connection between textual analysis and visual imagery. Students are required to choose one line of dialogue from the play as a tagline for their poster, and an image that illuminates the mood of the production. Additionally, they must incorporate details such as the names of the playwright and director, the location and dates of the production, and information about purchasing tickets. Students may turn in an electronic copy or a physical copy of their poster, and they present their posters to the class. I have found that the poster projects significantly improved after I spent some time analyzing successful posters for actual productions. Students also write critical responses to a production in the department; the first of these falls before the unit on Brecht. This essay assignment requires application of the terminology used for structural analysis of drama and identifying a Premise for the production. The Premise ideally helps students to formulate a thesis





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statement for the essay. Students are specifically tasked with applying the Premise statement to design elements and acting choices in the production. The second critical response assignment tends to focus on genre and style. The first time I taught this course at Michigan State, the second production in the fall semester was Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, a dark comedy that defies genre categories. I have subsequently adjusted this writing assignment for particular productions, asking students to identify how design elements enhanced the mood of Tracy Letts's psychological thriller *Bug* and of Carlo Gozzi's commedia dell'arte fairy tale *The Serpent Lady*. One objective in the two writing assignments is to develop students' understanding of theater design. I have attempted to shape these assignments so that students focus initially on scenic design and costume design, which are more obviously related to storytelling. The second essay encourages students to consider lighting design and sound design, which tend to be more evocative of mood. Thus, by the time students in my Play Analysis course are exposed to Brecht, they should have a basic understanding of dramatic structure and a sense of how various theater artists might analyze the same text in different ways. They are likely to be more comfortable thinking about scenic design and costume design than about lighting design, sound design, and media design. And they are likely to be developing a stronger understanding of how actors, directors, dramaturgs, and producers think about a play.

This multiplicity of perspectives is evident in the film *Theater of War*, a documentary that examines the Public Theater's 2006 production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* as adapted by playwright Tony Kushner.⁶ *Theater of War* features interviews with many theater artists involved in the production, including Kushner, director George C. Wolfe, Public Theater artistic director Oskar Eustis, costume designer Marina Draghici, composer Jeanine Tesori, and actress Meryl Streep. All of these contributors are interviewed at length about their approach to the text, their research process, and their interest in Brecht. The film invites us to watch these artists at work, engaged in the production process that students are learning in class and explaining why Brecht offers unique and exciting challenges for actors, designers, directors, translators, composers, and theater managers. The film also introduces aesthetic, political, and historical contexts in accessible ways. Jay Cantor teaches Brecht alongside Marx in a classroom. Later, Cantor's discussion of alienated labor is juxtaposed with interviews of a theater technician building props for the production. Marina Draghici explains that the costumes are not specific to a particular war in a particular time and place, but are evocative of war more generally. She clips newspaper photos about the Iraq War as research, emphasizing that her eclectic approach to the costumes is intended to make audience members think about how they are implicated in US military activities in Iraq. Archival photographs and footage of Brecht and Helene Weigel give a sense of the





aesthetic and political stakes of Brecht's work. Barbara Brecht-Schall is interviewed about her father's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee and calls him "that old faker," humorously suggesting that his English was much better than he pretended it was.

I have found that screening the documentary *Theater of War* increases student interest in *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Brecht's artistic practice for two reasons. First, in chronicling the rehearsal and production process, the film introduces the play's important characters and main plot points. Before I started using this film in class, I found students resistant to the length and episodic structure of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Giving students a sense of the plot and characters before they do the reading has led to better comprehension of the play's content. Second, and more crucially for first-year theater majors, *Theater of War* offers the opportunity to observe theater professionals in a rehearsal and production process. Jeanine Tesori discusses her process of composing for specific performers as "couture"; students interested in musical theater are impressed by Tesori because she recently won a Tony Award for *Fun Home*. Almost universally, my theater students are elated to observe Meryl Streep in rehearsal and to hear her talk about acting. Because most of my students admire and wish to emulate Streep, her advocacy for Brecht's importance enhances the relevance of Brecht's work for them.

Having screened this film, students are well prepared to read *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Students take a quiz on each play we read, and the quiz questions frame our discussion. Generally the quizzes include some questions about plot points and other questions intended to delve deeper. The quiz on *Mother Courage and Her Children* asks about the loss of her three children. I recently revised the second half of this quiz to encourage more in-depth reflection on *Theater of War* by providing several short quotations from the film and asking students to write a short response to one quote that helped them better understand the play. After reviewing these quizzes and discussing the play and the film, I offer lecture material on Brecht's life and work. The lecture includes excerpts from some of Brecht's theoretical writings, notably a list of contrasts between epic theater and dramatic theater. This allows us to revisit Aristotle, especially his comparisons between theater and epic poetry. To help students understand episodic structure, I compare the twelve scenes in *Mother Courage and Her Children* with the fourteen Stations of the Cross, noting that Jesus falls three times and that Anna Fierling loses her three children.⁷ The lecture slides end with production photos illustrating strategies for staging *Gestus* and *Verfremdungseffekt*: Weigel's silent scream, several versions of Mother Courage's cart, placards and protest signs in a production of *Leben des Galilei* (*Life of Galileo*), a puppet as the child in *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*). This use of production photos ties in





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with learning objectives that develop students' understanding of how theater artists think practically and creatively about staging plays.

I then ask students to explore these key Brechtian concepts by working in groups to prepare a short scene from *Mother Courage and Her Children* that they present to the class. Directions for this "scene-study" exercise are as follows:

Gestus is Brecht's term for that which expresses basic human attitudes—not merely "gesture" but all signs of social relations: deportment, intonation, facial expression. The Stanislavskian actor is to work at identifying with the character he or she portrays, while the Brechtian actor may "comment" on the character or the language. *Gestus* is usually stylized; an example is Helene Weigel's silent scream.

Verfremdungseffekt (V-Effect) or "Estrangement Effect": To discourage audience from identifying with character and so losing detachment, the action must continually be made strange, alien, remote, separate. To do this, the director must use any devices that preserve or establish this distancing.

1. Choose one scene from *Mother Courage and Her Children*.
2. Identify opportunities for Estrangement Effect and *Gestus* in this scene. How would you handle the scene titles?
3. Take turns explaining to each other what happens in the scene, as though you witnessed the scene.
4. Be prepared to perform the scene for the class as though you were explaining a traffic accident. You should mostly narrate the scene in your own words, but you should also include some dialogue from the play.
5. Discuss how you might create a Brechtian production of another play we have read, such as *Trifles* or *A Doll's House*. How would adding Estrangement Effect and *Gestus* change the message of the play?

Goal: Maintain feelings of detachment: observe the character, demonstrate the character's actions, but do not fully identify with the role.

This exercise also draws on their reading of "The Street Scene" in terms of this essay's emphasis on narration in epic theater with the example of the traffic accident. With regard to overall course objectives, this Brechtian scene-study exercise encourages students to analyze the play using techniques that might be employed by an actor or a director. A larger implication that I hope to impart is that theater artists must use different approaches to explore different kinds of plays.





Having enacted their understanding of Brecht's theories by applying them to *Mother Courage and Her Children*, students are primed to analyze Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* through the lens of Brechtian aesthetics. *Cloud 9* (1978) is a play in two acts that begins in an unspecified nineteenth-century British colony and ends in London in the 1970s. Developed in collaboration with the Joint Stock Company, *Cloud 9* focuses on questions of colonialism and gender. The quiz on *Cloud 9* asks students to describe the structure of the play, and then to discuss the role of gender in the play. Students are usually divided about whether the cross-gender casting specified by Churchill constitutes a *Verfremdungseffekt*. Scholars tend to claim this practice as Brechtian, because casting male actors in the roles of Victorian housewife Betty in act 1 and five-year-old Cathy in act 2 encourages spectators to think critically about gender as socially constructed.⁸ This discussion is enhanced by production photos that demonstrate a range of strategies for approaching the role of Betty. Costume and makeup choices affect the degree to which Betty's gender performance is perceived as *Verfremdungseffekt*: a bearded Betty with short hair comes across very differently from a more fully feminized Betty whose wig, makeup, and corset allow the male actor to pass as a woman. Gendered qualities of voice and gesture are also significant for how an audience will understand this role. This exercise contributes to the overall course objective of thinking about how to make specific choices about a text in production, while sharpening students' understanding of *Verfremdungseffekt* and establishing Brecht's theories as influential in late twentieth-century drama.

A second video resource situates Brecht as a pillar of modern drama and affords useful comparative approaches. Richard Eyre narrates *Between Beckett and Brecht: Looking In, Looking Out* as part of a BBC series called *Changing Stages*.⁹ This video reviews Brecht's aesthetic while arguing that many late twentieth-century playwrights can trace their genealogy either to Brecht or to Samuel Beckett. Students screen this video after reading *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *Cloud 9*. It serves as an introduction to Beckett, whose play *Endgame* is featured in the textbook. Eyre cites Churchill and Tony Kushner as heirs to Brecht's dramaturgy. Having seen Kushner in *Theater of War*, students generally react positively to his presence in this second film. While watching the *Changing Stages* video, students are given a worksheet to check boxes indicating aesthetic devices that are Brechtian in one column, and Beckettian in another. The worksheet lists key terms, titles, and individuals as defined in the film. Where Brecht is outward directed, Beckett is inward directed. Brecht is associated with epic theater and *Verfremdungseffekt*; Beckett is associated with minimalism, Existentialism, and Theater of the Absurd. While Brecht's plays focus on social problems, Beckett's plays are primarily concerned with passing the time, generally while waiting for death. Brechtian actors may comment on their characters; Beckettian characters have no offstage lives. While Brecht





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influenced Churchill, Kushner, and Edward Bond, Beckett influenced Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard.

After discussing *Endgame*, students use this Brechtian/Beckettian dichotomy as a frame for analyzing Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman*. Set in a subway car and featuring the cyclical structure of Theater of the Absurd, *Dutchman* also aims at evoking critical responses in audience members by interpellating white subway passengers as complicit in the murder of African American protagonist Clay. Students thus see that Baraka employs both Brechtian and Beckettian techniques, which generally leads them to question the neatness of the argument presented by Richard Eyre in the *Changing Stages* video. Similar questions are raised by other plays in the final unit of the course, notably works by Luis Valdez, Griselda Gambaro, and Anna Deavere Smith.¹⁰ Finally, students are given an opportunity to engage with Brecht (or Beckett) on a take-home final exam. A short essay question invites creative approaches to applying Brechtian techniques in adaption: "In the *Changing Stages* video we watched on Brecht and Beckett, narrator Richard Eyre pointed out the changes Bertolt Brecht would have made to *Waiting for Godot*: changing Pozzo to 'von Pozzo' (a landowner) and generally making the play more about social class. Apply these ideas to another text. How might Brecht rewrite *Endgame* or *A Doll's House*? Or, how would Beckett rewrite *Mother Courage and Her Children* or *Cloud 9*?" This question asks students to review at least one of the plays they have read in the course and to use concepts taught in the units on Brecht and Beckett. In an upper-level theater course or in a course more focused on directing and adaptation, this assignment could be developed and expanded into a group project that would culminate in a final performance. In a course on German drama, students might be asked to propose a vision for rewriting a play by Goethe, Schiller, or Büchner in the style of Brecht.

Learning Outcomes and Limitations

Incorporating video resources and targeted exercises has improved students' comprehension of *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Brechtian theatrical practice. In a survey given at the end of fall semester 2016, I asked students which plays they particularly enjoyed, from which plays they learned the most, and which plays they would cut from the syllabus. Two students cited *Mother Courage and Her Children* as a play they enjoyed, and several others listed *Cloud 9* as a favorite. In response to the question about which play led to the most learning, a solid majority answered *Mother Courage and Her Children*.

Reinforcement of vocabulary terms through lecture, video, and quizzes has yielded excellent student retention of this terminology and much success in using this terminology to analyze text-based and visual sources for evidence of *Verfremdungseffekt*. Much of the ordering of assignments





and texts has evolved over four years of teaching this course. The first time I used *Theater of War* in class, I showed excerpts from the film after the students were supposed to have read *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Based on quiz results and lackluster discussion, I inferred that many students had not actually read Brecht's play. Screening the film before assigning the reading has led to significantly better participation from students. The Brecht/Beckett worksheet was initially developed as a quiz to be given after students viewed the *Changing Stages* video. I have found that students pay more attention to the video and retain the information better if they are actively engaged in searching for answers while screening the video. I have previously screened this video before discussing *Cloud 9*, but I now find it more effective to do so afterward. Having already analyzed the semiotic stakes of Betty's gender performances, students express delight and consternation upon seeing that the actor who played Betty in the original production was not only bearded, but balding.

While students are able to grasp Brechtian ideas intellectually and analytically, they have some difficulty in making use of these concepts as theater artists. Application of these concepts demonstrates willingness to experiment, but there is room for improvement here. The scene-study exercise is generally successful insofar as student acting choices move beyond Stanislavski-based realism into stylization and theatricality. It is not clear that this stylization actually constitutes *Gestus* or *Verfremdungseffekt*. For instance, one student portrayed a cow that commented on the action by mooing. While this was a very theatrical and humorous choice, it did not necessarily invite spectators to reflect critically on what they were seeing. Another group achieved an effect much closer to *Gestus* by creating a stylized good-bye gesture that led to a very moving portrayal of characters leaving each other. Similarly, student responses to the final exam question demonstrate an incomplete ability to apply Brechtian concepts as theater artists. Students err by focusing either entirely on politics or entirely on theatrical artifice. One student's effort to rewrite *Endgame* in Brecht's style emphasizes the impact of war on the characters, but does so in a way that is more invested in questions of given circumstances than theatrical strategies.

Without contextualization, *Theater of War* may leave students with some misconceptions about Brechtian acting style. As shown in the film, Meryl Streep's portrayal of Mother Courage tends toward realism, with bursts of intense emotion. Reviews of the production suggest that Streep's overall performance incorporated Brechtian techniques in ways that are not thoroughly demonstrated in the documentary.¹¹ The film itself does little to point out the aesthetic concepts of *Gestus* or *Verfremdungseffekt*, focusing more on Brecht's politics than his aesthetic innovations. Nevertheless, by approaching these concepts from multiple angles, I know that students are at least familiar with this terminology. In using *Theater of War* and *Between Beckett and Brecht* as video resources, some instructors may want





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to emphasize the limitations of these resources earlier than I do. While I am interested in students understanding that documentary films use various rhetorical techniques to present an argument, I am not overtly critical of some of the more heavy-handed aspects of these two films, unless students raise questions about this. Students could develop better information literacy with a more sustained focus on how documentary films use sound, image, and text to combine logical argument with affective response.

Recommendations

Clarity of instructions and reiterating overall purpose are important. The first time I tried to use the Brechtian acting exercise, I did not include the terms *Gestus* or *Verfremdungseffekt* on the handout. Students were very confused about what they were supposed to be doing and did not get very much out of the exercise. By using these key words to frame the classwork, I was able to elicit much better student understanding of the assignment's goals. It would be productive to expand upon these ideas in an upper-level theater course, perhaps by applying a Brechtian lens to non-Brechtian plays or comparing Brechtian *Gestus* to Michael Chekhov's concept of psychological gesture. This exercise could also be simplified or further refined by offering specific possibilities for the *Gestus* to be performed. Such a strategy may be of interest to German instructors who would like to incorporate acting but might be concerned about students coming up with their own creative approaches to *Gestus*.

In my experience, comparative approaches are most useful for understanding Brecht. Indeed, many of Brecht's own writings define his aesthetic in comparison with other possibilities: epic theater is defined in opposition to dramatic theater; *Verfremdungseffekt* is related to Brecht's experience of Chinese opera. In my introductory Play Analysis course, Brecht contrasts with the realism of Ibsen, the classical dramaturgy of Euripides, and the poetic minimalism of Beckett. Comparisons to Caryl Churchill, Tony Kushner, Amiri Baraka, and Anna Deavere Smith demonstrate potential applications of Brechtian techniques. A German-language course could use comparative approaches fruitfully by studying Brecht in dialogue with Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Büchner, or Heiner Müller.

Charles Mee theatrically explores comparisons between Brecht and Müller in his play *Full Circle*, an adaptation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* set in Berlin in 1989.¹² In upper-level Theater Studies courses (Theater and Global Diversity; China and Intercultural Theater), I have taught *Full Circle* along with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and a scholarly English translation of the Chinese *zaju* play that inspired both.¹³ Theater studies as a field has been interested in critiques of Brecht's appropriation of Asian aesthetics as indicative of the problematic nature of intercultural theater.¹⁴ While raising these questions, I tend to focus more on Brecht as engaged in strategies





of adaptation. Wenwei Du's article on translations and adaptations of Li Qianfu's *Huilan Ji* (*The Chalk Circle*) provides an accessible point of entry for students considering Brecht's play as an adaptation of Chinese source material via Klabund's German version.¹⁵ Thus, Brecht's work can also be considered in the contexts of intercultural theater or adaptation in courses that might focus specifically on these topics.

Though the unit on Brecht and Brechtian theater in my introductory Play Analysis course is slated for six class sessions, my reflection on the significance of Brecht for this course indicates that his work is essential for almost the entire second half of my syllabus. It is crucial for theater students to develop some understanding of Brecht, and I am hopeful that my curriculum piques their interest in Brecht while providing them with the basic knowledge of his work that they need in order to understand theater in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Notes

¹ For a useful comparative overview of methods of play analysis in theater studies, see Geoffrey S. Proehl, "Pattern," in *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 85–115. Among the approaches discussed by Proehl are Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet," *Theater* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 4–9, and Julian Olf, "Reading the Dramatic Text for Production," *Theatre Topics* 7, no. 2 (1997): 153–69.

² W. B. Worthen, ed., *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*, brief 6th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage, 2011).

³ Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946).

⁴ Rob Roznowski and Kirk Domer, *Collaboration in Theatre: A Practical Guide for Designers and Directors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁵ See Shelley Orr, "Teaching Play Analysis: How a Key Dramaturgical Skill Can Foster Critical Approaches" *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 1 (2003): 153–58.

⁶ John W. Walter, *Theater of War* (New York: Kino International, 2008).

⁷ This comparison was initially suggested to me by Rev. David Garrick when I was an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame.

⁸ See Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); James Harding, "Cloud Cover: (Re)Dressing Desire and Comfortable Subversions in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*," *PMLA* 113, no. 2 (1998): 258–71.

⁹ Jamie Muir and Richard Eyre, *Changing Stages, Between Beckett and Brecht: Looking In, Looking Out* (New York: Films for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2001).

¹⁰ On Smith's acting style, see Debby Thompson, "Is Race a Trope? Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity," *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 127–38. Thompson argues that Smith's acting style is partly





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Brechtian, pointing out the estrangement effect in Smith's use of sugar packets as a *Gestus* in her portrayal of Minister Conrad Mohammed in *Fires in the Mirror*.

¹¹ For example, Brett D. Johnson, "Review of *Mother Courage and Her Children*," *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 2 (May 2007): 281–82.

¹² Charles Mee, *Full Circle* (ca. 1998), <http://www.charlesmee.org/full-circle.shtml>. Retrieved July 19, 2016.

¹³ Li Zingdao, *Rescriptor-in-Waiting Bao's Clever Trick: The Record of the Chalk Circle, in Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals: Eleven Early Chinese Plays*, Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema, eds. and trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010), 237–82.

¹⁴ Min Tian, "'Alienation Effect' for Whom? Brecht's (Mis)Interpretation of the Classical Chinese Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1997): 200–22.

¹⁵ Wenwei Du, "The Chalk Circle Comes Full Circle: From Yuan Drama to the Western Stage to Peking Opera," *Asian Theatre Journal* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 307–25.

