

## Political Theater in the United States: Two Cultural Moments

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"America is not going in Piscator's direction," Clifford Odets said in response to the failure of Erwin Piscator's epic drama *Case of Clyde Griffiths* on Broadway in the spring of 1936 (Ley-Piscator 43). Staged by the renowned Group Theater, the play achieved some critical acclaim for imaginative acting, but was rejected by labor and liberal press alike for its didactic formalism and militant propaganda. It ran for only nineteen performances—a definite flop by Broadway standards. Piscator's friend and colleague Bertolt Brecht did not fare any better. The American premiere of his *Threepenny Opera* in 1933 went largely unnoticed. A subsequent production of his agitprop drama *The Mother* by the leftist Theater Union in 1935 received much press coverage, but was once more almost unanimously rejected by critics from Left and Right as ideologically top-heavy, overtly didactic, formalistic, sectarian, and emotionally sterile. As the reviewer of *Woman's Wear Daily* put it, "The onlooker, no matter how sympathetic, fails to become emotionally overpowered. The play remains too distant from his periphery of feeling" (Dash); and, he went on to explain, "After all, at least in this country, we are still instinctively individualistic, rather than collectivistic, and we prefer, subconsciously, our drama in terms of individual strife and conflict and clash." Epic drama provides, by definition, none of these parameters.

Odets's diagnosis conveniently summarizes the overall failure of European modernist political theater on the American stage in the 1930s. Clearly, America went neither in Piscator's nor in Brecht's direction. As Mordecai Gorelik pointed out,

We in the United States have only a vague knowledge of the experimental work carried on in the German Theater between 1919-1932, although three plays of the "epic" theater of Brecht and Piscator have been presented in New York in recent years. . . . But even when the New York examples of epic productions were before us, we were not able to see clearly the functioning and purpose of the epic form ("Epic Realism" 29).

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The reluctance to engage fully Brecht's and Piscator's high-modernist models of political theater had to do with concrete cultural and political contingencies. In the 1930s, the American stage favored a political theater tradition which was of a decidedly populist slant, appealing to what Dash had described as the "periphery of feeling" of the broad masses. This approach, which I term "vernacular" for its effective translation of political issues into popular sentiments and imagery, enabled the theater of the Left to consolidate and mobilize a diverse Popular Front audience. Some thirty years later, however, leading American theater artists showed a renewed interest in Epic Theater and began to consciously modify it for contemporary theater praxis. Leftist groups such as the Living Theater, the Bread and Puppet Theater, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and El Teatro Campesino purposely revisited the European avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s and situated their work within the avant-garde's modernist political theater tradition.

We thus encounter two distinct cultural moments in U.S. American political theater: rejection of the high-modernist approach of Brecht and Piscator in the 30s and its creative adaptation and transformation some three decades later, a predominant vernacular aesthetic on the New Deal stage and a late flourishing of modernism in the Johnson era. In the following, I shall look at these moments separately and discuss how they related to the general cultural and political context of their time. I will demonstrate that the predominant, Frankfurt-School-inflected definition of the "political" that holds sway in theater studies<sup>1</sup> be reconsidered with regard to its specific cultural and historical contingencies; in short, the "modernist" is inconceivable without consideration of the "vernacular" conditions of its reception.

### The 1930s: Brecht on Broadway

That the European modernist notion of political theater was fundamentally at odds with the American vernaculist one became most apparent when Theater Union, the leading professional American workers' theater, attempted to stage Brecht's epic play *The Mother*. Brecht had streamlined Maxim Gorky's classic *Bildungsroman* about the political formation of a Russian mother into a sparse and militant didactic drama, radically eliminating its emphasis on milieu and psychology, its sentimental overtones, and revolutionary pathos. His play had enjoyed considerable success among the German Left when it premiered in Berlin in 1932, sparking vivid discussions among workers and intellectuals over the methods of class struggle and the role of the party in it. When transferred to the American stage in 1935, Theater Union subjugated the play to a thorough adaptation for American audiences, which resulted in the reintegration of precisely those naturalist and sentimental overtones which Brecht vehemently objected to in the Gorky original and sought to overcome in his own work.

Brecht had written *The Mother* as "a piece of anti-metaphysical,

materialistic, non-aristotelian drama" (*Collected Plays*, vol. 3/2, 240).<sup>2</sup> As such, it was to offer few-to-no opportunities for identification with the characters and no emotional involvement with the dramatic action. According to Brecht, theater could be politically effective only if it emancipated the spectator from empathetic absorption and turned her into a judicious observer. This was to be primarily achieved through *Verfremdung* (translated roughly as "distantiation"). Moreover, through *Verfremdung* he sought to prevent the festive merging of the audience in the shared aesthetic experience of catharsis (a process he considered typical for bourgeois "culinary" theater) and to instead expose the clash of class interests in the audience itself. As attested by various reviews, the Berlin production effectively achieved this end, causing cheers on the Left and much consternation on the Right.<sup>3</sup> Content and form were thus intricately intertwined in Brecht's theater praxis, fulfilling both a specific political function (to augment class consciousness) as well as an aesthetic one (*Verfremdung* of conventional modes of perception), both of which fit easily into a high-modernist understanding of political theater.

The political and aesthetic agenda of the Theater Union was, however, a completely different one. Not only did it not want to alienate the non-proletarian sections of its audience, but, on the contrary, it tried to reach out to as many sympathizers as possible. Like most U.S. professional leftist theaters of the time, it targeted a rather heterogeneous public which it sought to consolidate in a broad liberal Popular Front, regardless of class affiliation. If a diverse audience was to endorse the political message of the play, empathetic access and emotional involvement seemed indispensable to Theater Union. American translator Paul Peters therefore reinserted the sentimental and naturalist details of the Gorky original in the hope of reviving these classic Aristotelian paradigms and of effectively merging and consolidating the audience in a community of interest.<sup>4</sup>

A close reading of the two *Mother* versions reveals the following crucial differences in Brecht and Theater Union's conceptions of political theater.<sup>5</sup> First, where Brecht persistently distances and alienates his audience through plot development, acting, and staging, Peters seeks to completely absorb the audience in Diderotian fashion in the illusion of the stage action. Take for instance the opening scene: Brecht's *Mother* addresses herself directly to the audience, introducing herself and her son, explaining why the soup is getting thinner each day. In Peters's adaptation, her economic plight and maternal worries emerge through much fussing and bustling about the stage. The Mother mumbles to herself, complains to her son Pavel, and never acknowledges the presence of the audience but rather effaces it behind an invisible fourth wall. Thus, while Brecht invites the spectator to critically observe and evaluate the unfolding action, Peters reduces her to the role of the hidden voyeur who quietly observes the action through the keyhole of the humble hut in Tver. In short, from the beginning, Peters sets up a fourth wall which he effectively sustains throughout the

play. The explicit and self-conscious theatricality of Brecht's epic approach, meant to forestall the culinary indulgence of the spectator and to instead provoke her critical judgment, is thus reintegrated into the narrative diegesis. Rather than being astonished by the weak consistency of Vlassova's soup, we accept it as an unfortunate but normal occurrence. In a like manner, Peters also smoothes out the abrupt scene transitions typical for Brecht, and attempts to integrate epic elements such as chorus presentations and film projections into the dramatic action.

Second, from the beginning, Peters directs the audience's attention to the mother-son relationship. Maternal worries become the dominant motivation for the plot development. The mother does not emerge as a person in her own right, as "Pelagea Vlassova, forty-two, a worker's widow and a worker's mother" (*Collected Plays*, vol. 3/2, 95), but first and foremost in the function of the fretting mother. Again, this approach has wide political implications. Vlassova's political maturation process is presented not as the result of her own subjective choices, but rather as the "natural" consequence of her maternal role in pre-revolutionary Tsarist Russia. Brecht, by contrast, presents Vlassova primarily as a working-class woman acting in accordance with her awakening class-consciousness and only secondarily as a mother. Her political formation results directly from the recognition of economic and political necessity and not from sentimental feelings for her son.

Third, in naturalist fashion, Peters clutters dialogues with greetings, introductions, and pleasantries. According to him, such phatic fillers would facilitate for the audience the process of identifying with what to them was a foreign setting and foreign characters (Lyon 140). His dialogues therefore emphasize contact, express sociability, and project a familiar atmosphere of domesticity and quotidian life. Suggesting verisimilitude, Peters thus once more reinforces the illusion of a fourth wall. Again, these changes ran counter to Brecht's aesthetic and political intentions. In contrast to Peters, he was not concerned with resemblance to everyday life but with historical dimension. His play was to be "a report from a great epoch" rather than a case study of quotidian proletarian life (*Collected Plays*, vol. 3/2, 265). As such, his dialogues were purely functional. Moreover, *Mother* was still very much conceived in the spirit of Brecht's previous *Lehrstücke* (didactic plays) in the sense that it deals with an abstract proposition rather than a concrete biographical study. As Walter Benjamin put it, *The Mother* presented a "sociological experiment on the revolutionizing of a mother."<sup>6</sup> This sense for historical dimension and sociological case study is entirely lost amidst the small talk of Peters's adaptation.

Finally, despite its heavy propagandistic tone, Brecht's *Mother* is almost entirely free of revolutionary pathos. Very much as in his abstract didactic play *The Decision*, the characters' actions are entirely motivated by their recognition of political necessity. There is no room for personal feelings or romantic revolutionary sentiments. Peters, by contrast, reinserts a strong degree of pathos by emphasizing the personal tragedy of the revolutionary. Pavel's

death—an important, but minor episode in Brecht's play—becomes the dramatic and emotional climax of his adaptation. In Brecht, Pavel is shot off-stage and the chorus reports the incident in its usual matter-of-fact tone: "Comrade Vlassova, your son has been shot" (*Collected Plays*, vol. 3/2, 138). Peters deems it more effective to have the son shot and die *on* stage shortly before the end of the play. For this, he writes an entirely new episode in which Pavel's death is transfigured into revolutionary martyrdom. It is at this point that the conversion of the mother into a revolutionary is complete: "You hear! What you did was good, Pavel. The workers will revenge you, Pavel. They won't forget. It won't be long now, Pavel. It won't be long" (65-66). Brechtian recognition of revolutionary necessity is in this manner transformed into revolutionary melodrama.

In sum, the American adaptation systematically set up and preserved the illusion of the fourth wall and in this manner invested characters and action with greater verisimilitude. It moreover sentimentalized the mother-son relationship in order to facilitate emotional identification for the audience. Likewise, it also significantly augmented the revolutionary pathos of the play by way of building up dramatic suspense towards an emotional climax. All this was geared towards eliciting the audience's sympathy for the mother above all on an emotional basis. Empathetic absorption in her political and personal growth was to ideally result in a cathartic effect, which in turn was to trigger the conversion of the spectator into a class-conscious political activist (analogous to the conversion of the mother). As board member George Sklar summed up Theater Union's fundamental conception of the play,

Gorki's simple story, very human, very warm, needed that kind of simple, human, developed scene treatment. And Brecht was so enchanted with his theories of non-involvement that he'd cut off a scene as soon as he felt the audience might get involved. Well, the TU wanted a responsive audience, not a frustrated one (qtd. in Baxandall 75).

It consequently advertised *Mother* as a "stirring play with music," as the "Epic of a Working-Class Mother Based on the Classic Gorki Novel." Brecht and his co-author Hanns Eisler (musical score) naturally protested the distortion of their political/aesthetic concept and tried to intervene in the production.<sup>7</sup> When their debates with director Victor Wolfson and the cast finally escalated, the board barred them from attending any further rehearsals. Peters's adaptation was staged as planned.

Yet, despite the significant melodramatization of Brecht's epic drama, the production could not stand. It represented an odd hybrid of styles, a blend of naturalism and Epic Theater with a dash of musical and agitprop. As one observer commented, "The emotional acting and the naturalistic details invited close audience involvement, while the fragmentary settings and stereopticon slides

served to keep the audience distant and detached" (qtd. in Himmelstein 186). As mentioned earlier, the production received few favorable reviews and was, overall, rejected by Left and Right as utterly foreign to the American stage. Richard Lockridge of the conservative *New York Sun* evidently summarized a prevailing sentiment when he wrote, "Certainly *Mother* has nothing to do with the American theater, from which the Theatre Union seems at this point to have seceded." Leading communist critic Michael Gold concurred with this position when he nonchalantly dismissed the play as essentially un-American, being "too German in form and spirit for an American audience" (*Daily Worker*). Gold's reaction was, in fact, indicative of the general aesthetic position of the American Left in the mid 30s, which at the time clearly advocated the turn from the crude experimental agitprop style (characteristic of the early 30s) towards greater mimetic breadth, psychological depth, and above all greater emphasis on national context.<sup>8</sup> This "dynamic socialist realism applied to the American scene," which had been effectively used in such popular proletarian melodramas like *Stevedore* and *Black Pit*, was, according to Gold, "the style closest to the American masses" (ibid). Most other leftist critics concurred. John Olgin called for the portrayal of "living human beings, men and women of flesh and blood" in his *Mother* review for *Daily Worker*. John Gassner, writing for the leftist journal *New Theatre & Film*, insisted that the dramatic portion of the play, the mother's story needed more psychological development. Even James Farrell of the pro-modernist *Partisan Review* rejected the play as crude and unsophisticated propaganda. In fact, it was only Stanley Burnshaw of *New Masses* who detected in Brecht's epic play a different kind of realism and warned the Left of the highly parochial aesthetic stand they conveyed in their reviews of the play.

Significantly, it was thus not so much the theme of militant class struggle in *Mother* but the highly abstract didacticism of its representation that the majority of reviewers rejected. It was not Gorky's melodramatic *Bildungsdrama* that failed with the American press, but Brecht's epic, non-Aristotelian rendition of it. The latter's aesthetic of *Verfremdung*, even in the tainted version produced by TU, proved to be fundamentally at odds with the American desire for emotional involvement and visceral entertainment. As Herbert Blau remarks,

It's well enough known by now that Brecht didn't want the audience carried away by any trancelike power of performance, but that inevitably presents a dilemma to theater practitioners, who have been trained to measure success by whether or not they've done so, and who, if they haven't been trained, simply think it should be so and that's what the theater is (242).

The case of Brecht on Broadway points to a general incommensurability between the European and the American conception of political theater at the time, at least in terms of the professional stage<sup>9</sup>—an incommensurability which Piscator likewise experienced when the Group Theater staged his Dreiser adaptation *Case of Clyde Griffiths* as well as during his subsequent work at the Dramatic Workshop of the New School for Social Research. Brecht's and Piscator's Epic Theater was of a decidedly modernist slant. It had inherited the militant oppositionality of the avant-garde, the formal iconoclasm of the art theater movement, the muckraking mission of naturalism, and the sophisticated dialectical strategies of Frankfurt School modernism—all of which it sublated in a highly confrontational and formalistic pedagogical program: the political education of the working class through innovative form and militant content. This necessitated the rigorous break with established cultural conventions and aesthetic traditions (at least on a rhetorical level). Brecht and Piscator's Epic Theater was moreover also the product of the concrete political contingencies of the German 1920s. Emerging in a time of intense class strife, Epic Theater advocated the proletarian revolution as the only way of abolishing social inequality. Towards this end, Brecht and Piscator radicalized form and content in order to arouse the working class against the bourgeois self-complacency and opportunism of the Weimar Republic. In other words, Epic Theater was in a way very much dependent on the extensive network of organized labor and the long-standing tradition of radical proletarian class-consciousness characteristic of the European proletariat. Given the aesthetic and social background of the European Left, Epic Theater could afford to be iconoclastic and experimental as well as militantly anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist.

Yet precisely these qualities incapacitated Epic Theater when transferred to the American 1930s. Although the New Deal era was just as much marked by class strife and economic recession as the Weimar Republic, a widespread and deeply ingrained class-consciousness did not exist among workers in the United States. Neither did most of them believe in all-out revolution as the only cure for social inequalities. The objective of political theater was therefore a completely different one. The American political theater preferred the populist approach because it strove to unite and consolidate a very diverse liberal public (including the middle class) in a Popular Front against recession, war, and fascism. This meant taking into consideration that most American and immigrant workers did not fundamentally doubt the viability of a "moral" capitalism, but advocated Keynesian reform and the interventionist state over Marxist revolution (Cohen 135-60). Most importantly, it had to cope with a rather ambiguous proletarian identity blurred by ethnic backgrounds and above all by the dissemination of middle class values promoted by the rise of consumerism and middlebrow aesthetics among the working class.<sup>10</sup> Professional political theater tried to accommodate the latter by appealing to a transcendental consumer identity and by activating a latent "We, the People" men-

tality, particularly by invoking the democratic values of 1776.<sup>11</sup> Such was, for instance, the prevalent approach of the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theater Project, allowing it to disseminate a number of burning national issues (such as public ownership of utilities companies in *Power*, improvement of urban housing in *One Third of a Nation*) to a broad and heterogeneous working public.

The turn towards a greater populism was also adopted by the new Communist platform of Earl Browder in 1936, which relinquished its former oppositional role (“Towards a Soviet America!”) for a more nationalist and populist standpoint (“Communism is 20<sup>th</sup> Century Americanism!”). At the American Writers’ Congress of 1935 (which was of course very much in the shadow of the Soviet Writers’ Congress of the previous year and its newly established doctrine of Socialist Realism), the Left moreover advocated a corresponding aesthetic turn, culminating in Kenneth Burke’s demand of replacing the exclusive symbol of “the worker” with the inclusive symbol of “the people” (“Revolutionary Symbolism”). This general political, social, and cultural context, as well as the predominance of naturalism on the American stage (particularly in the highly melodramatic mode of David Belasco) helps us to understand why U.S. American political theater in the 30s tended to prefer conventional aesthetic paradigms, national themes and a decidedly populist audience approach—in short, vernacular political theater.

By the term “vernacular political theater,” I here refer to a theater praxis that attempted to mobilize the masses not by way of confrontational education but by way of eliciting personal identification with and emotional absorption in the political issue at stake. As Grant Farred asserts in his study of vernacularity, *What’s My Name?*, the vernacular manages to link the political to the popular by teasing out the “intense identificatory pleasure” of the personal in the political—without which political struggle would not only be tedious but probably also unsuccessful. In the 1930s, the American stage did so precisely by using the proven dramatic paradigms of empathy and absorption, illusionism and verisimilitude. Partaking in the aesthetic and cultural venues already established by bourgeois theater, it rarely struck its observer as iconoclastic in form and mostly not even insurgent in content. On the contrary, rather than proclaiming the proletarian revolution and antagonizing the bourgeoisie, it often contented itself with achieving a higher degree of visibility for labor culture and staking out sites for the articulation of labor identity within the dominant social order. Most of all, it freely partook in mass culture and attempted to use (rather than denounce and oppose) the existing cultural apparatus for its own political agenda.

The New Deal stage practiced vernacular political theater with great success, producing such popular hits as the proletarian melodrama *Stevedore* by Paul Peters and George Sklar, the naturalist study of Pennsylvania coal mines *Black Pit* by Albert Maltz (both staged by Theater Union), as well as the ILGWU labor revue *Pins*



and *Needles*, and Marc Blitzstein's proletarian musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (originating with the Federal Theater Project and then produced independently by Orson Welles and John Houseman). These productions shared either a high degree of emotional absorption and visceral pleasure or a high degree of entertainment in the form of visual and musical spectacle. Overall, they tended to provide workers and salaried masses with a rather sentimental education about current political issues, inducing political interest above all by eliciting empathy with the exploited masses on stage or by appealing to a common identity beyond class, i.e. the plebeian consumer.<sup>12</sup> In most cases, this meant a return to conventional dramatic genres (melodrama, naturalism, vaudeville, musical) and paradigms (absorption, empathy, catharsis)—the logic of which Gorelik cynically described thus: "The greater the [visceral] craving, the greater the release, and the greater the box office return. Q.E.D" ("Epic Realism" 36). But even such highly theatrical shows as Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* and the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theater Project, which in fact integrated modernist agitprop and epic elements, nevertheless operated on the premise that political effect could be achieved only via cathartic identification with the protagonist and emotional absorption in the stage action. Given the popular and financial success of vernacular political theater in the U.S., it is not surprising that the decidedly formalistic, didactic, sectarian, and alienating political theater of Brecht and Piscator stood little chance at the time.

### The 60s: Bread and Puppet Theater

The 1960s witnessed not only a renaissance of political theater in the U.S., but, more specifically, the belated break-through of modernist political theater. This does not mean that modernism suddenly became the dominant mode of theatrical representation, but simply that more and more theater artists in the U.S. began to explore and use a tradition that had until then largely been rejected for its supposed intellectualism and lack of emotionality and entertainment, or which had simply been ignored. Brecht's and Piscator's growing international reputations, particularly after the triumph of *Mother Courage* in Paris in 1954, and the diligent promotional work of American intellectuals and artists had helped to pave the way for Epic Theater in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, a number of artists had gained first-hand experience of Piscator's work while studying with him at the Dramatic Workshop of the New School for Social Research in New York—most famously, Tennessee Williams and Robert Penn Warren. Aside from that, the advent of abstract expressionism in the visual arts and its steady integration into the mainstream had made the American public much more open to modernist experimentation. Although it was still rare on Broadway, academic drama departments and off-Broadway theaters began to increasingly explore Epic Theater.<sup>14</sup>

It was particularly in the emergent political protest theater movement of the 60s that the methods and techniques of modernist

political theater had a major breakthrough. The Living Theater comes to mind; co-founder Judith Malina repeatedly referred to her training with Piscator in New York (although the more decisive influence on the Living Theater certainly came from Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, avant-garde jazz, and the LSD culture of the 60s). The influence of Brecht and Piscator was most notable in the performances of such 60s pioneers as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, and the Bread and Puppet Theater, all of which defined themselves in classic modernist tradition as fundamentally anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist professional (but non-commercial) leftist theaters. Their primary political goal was to educate a general public about current economic, political, and social issues and to incite the audience to political activism. With low-budget productions and performances in public spaces (streets, parks, meeting halls, factories, farms), they attempted to remain outside commercial venues and to retain a high degree of autonomy from the culture industry. "We are not 'professional' in that we do not wish to end up on Broadway or commercial TV or on film. Our work springs from community and from ideological commitment," Ron Davis of the Mime Troupe asserted at the Radical Theater Festival in San Francisco in 1968 (*Radical Theater Festival* 7). All three groups furthermore employed a high degree of theatricality, combining various popular techniques (from vaudeville, *commedia dell'arte*, circus, melodrama, comic strip) with agitprop (montage, typification) and epic techniques (songs, masks, narrators, painted signs, puppets), deliberately foregoing stage illusionism for the sake of direct audience contact and confrontation.

While all three groups shared a deep commitment to leftist social change and in general situated themselves within the modernist tradition, their methods of political agitation differed widely. Teatro Campesino and the Mime Troupe focused on straightforward agitprop work, relying above all on the narrative explication of specific economic, political, and social relations (e.g. Delano Grape Strike, Vietnam, equality of the sexes). Using the broad gestures, stereotypical characters, farcical humor, and populist sentiment of what Peter Brook calls the "rough theater," they also significantly vernacularized their political agenda. Luis Valdez, for instance, characterized his group as "somewhere between Brecht and [the popular Mexican clown] Cantiflas" (*Radical Theatre Festival* 10), while the Mime Troupe became known for its combination of "theater, revolution and grooving in the parks" (*Ibid.* 13). In short, all three groups combined a vehemently oppositional modernist agenda with vernacular techniques of representation, an approach reminiscent of the theater work of Sergey Eisenstein and Piscator.

Bread and Puppet was in many regards the most modernist of the three groups. Peter Schumann's concept of political theater had been decisively shaped by his training as a sculptor, his work in abstract dance, as well as his interest in Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer's theory of the body-as-art figure and Kurt Schwitters's dadaist collages. He thus brought a distinctly avant-garde notion

of space, movement, form, and material to his work in the political theater, resulting above all in his typical preference of the image over narrative. As Schumann explains, "We are starting from forms—pure musical and movement ideas—and then we proceed slowly to something that, we feel, becomes understandable, becomes communicable" (qtd. in Kourilsky 105). Because of its non-literary, abstract, and image-based approach, Bread and Puppet has been described as "anti-theater," referring above all to the silence and slowness that mark its performances.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Schumann's austere, collagistic, and non-mimetic representations certainly distantiate and alienate his audience from the issue at hand. In contrast to his colleagues Valdez and Davis, he does not seek to mobilize the public directly to action nor to raise their political consciousness. Rather, by integrating this stark imagery into basic allegorical narratives of good and evil, oppression and resistance, he appeals to his audience's moral conscience, seeking to elicit such moral indignation and emotional concern that could trigger if not immediate political action then at least ethical responsibility. That said, Schumann, while highly modernist in form, is at the same time also decidedly vernacular in narrative, appealing to a universal humanist sensibility. In short, Schumann developed a unique way of combining Brechtian *Verfremdung* (puppets, masks) with Christian eschatology (communal sharing of bread at the end of each show).

During his active involvement with the anti-war movement, Schumann staged a number of street parades and stationary performances. Performed in open public spaces, these shows had to first create their audiences before they could affect them politically. Bread and Puppet's use of powerful imagery was perfect for this task. The unexpected confrontation with eight-foot-tall puppets and solemn masks would inevitably arrest the attention of passers-by while the deliberate, slow movements of the performers would interrupt and halt the quotidian flow of urban life. Consider, for instance, the Bread and Puppet performance during the second Fifth Avenue anti-war march in March 1966, probably its most famous. On that day, the casual observer would behold, in the midst of thousands of marchers, a few black-clad men with skull-masks dragging down the street a group of performers draped in white sheets and wearing large white masks of a Vietnamese woman's face. Bound, blindfolded, and chained together by a single rope, the women would slowly trudge along until suddenly attacked by a large papier-mâché airplane with shark teeth painted on it carried by a third group of performers also clad in black. The women would sway back and forth in unison, fall, and bend over, but eventually be yanked up again by the players in black. This sequence would be repeated in slow motion over and over again, all the while accompanied by a cacophony of noise produced by makeshift instruments (e.g. gasoline cans filled with nuts and bolts). This choreography of mime, sound, and imagery must undoubtedly have struck any chance observer as strange. With the help of compelling abstract imagery and silent mime, Schumann not only

succeeded in effectively defamiliarizing/distantiating the common narrative of war espoused by the media, but also the very experience of an anti-war protest movement as such (usually that of marchers holding placards and shouting slogans). But besides accomplishing an obvious *Verfremdungseffekt* and inducing a critical distance between beholder and spectacle, the Bread and Puppet performance also resonated with its audience on a completely different level.

Although unusual in form, Schumann's imagery and choreography was at the same time intimately familiar to them. Reverting to classic Manichean and typically essentialist notions of good and evil, they represented basic allegories of modern warfare and oppression: male perpetrator vs. female victim, active aggression vs. passive resistance, technocratic society vs. rural community. In this manner, they easily elicited archaic emotional responses in the audience: empathy for the victims, antagonism towards the aggressor, the desire to protect the defenseless females and to stop the intruding males. This populist appeal to basic humanist sentiments was enhanced in other performances through the integration of such stereotypical caricatures as Uncle Fatso and such decidedly moralistic referents as Jesus Christ and the Grey Mother (cf. St. Patrick's vigil in protest of Cardinal Spellman's war advocacy in NYC, December '66). Significantly, these archetypal images were not so much referents of a concrete socio-political reality (as they would be in classic agitprop work) as of general ethical concepts. Easily recognizable as representations of good and evil, they steered the reception process of the audience by referring it back to general moral values that were deeply entrenched in Western culture. Clearly, Schumann did not seek to educate the public about the political or social context of the war (as Brecht or Piscator would have done) but instead tried to provoke moral indignation and emotional protest by capturing the moral affect of a political situation in as concise and striking an image as possible.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to its use of archetypically humanist and Christian allegories, Bread and Puppet was thus, despite its modernist use of form and space, which significantly subverted conventional mimetic modes of production and reception, decidedly vernacular. Tapping into already existing ethical sentiments, Schumann provoked a strong sense of moral consternation (*Betroffenheit*). Besides alerting his spectators to ongoing moral transgressions, he also confronted them with the necessity of doing something about it. According to him, the political function of theater consisted not in the provocation to direct political action (à la Piscator and Eisenstein), nor in the definition of problems and the proposition of solutions, but in inducing the audience to define the problems themselves. Such political commitment, however, could only stem from moral conviction and emotional concern.<sup>17</sup> Schumann's notion of political theater was, in short, decidedly vernacular and inherently Brechtian at the same time, for while he asserted that political conviction was "un sensibilité du coeur" (qtd. in Stefan

Brecht 580), he also stressed that the actual intellectual work needed to be accomplished by the spectator herself.

Schumann effectively crossed, modified, and collapsed in other ways the boundary between vernacular and modernist conceptions of political theater that apparently divided Brecht and the Theater Union in the 30s. His allegorical images cannot be completely reduced to sociological types (with the notable exception of Uncle Fatso), but always carry a surplus of meaning. This is most evident in his use of collage and tableau. In the manner of Schwitters's Merz stage, Schumann assemble miscellaneous material into a heterogeneous collage with the goal of using

the most possible unmarried and uncombined means—any garbage can, any music, anything we can find, any smallness and bigness—and get a communion out of it, not by creating atmospheres and moods and dialogues and tales, but by leaving these things as pure as they can be and eventually touching them together, bringing them really together (qtd. in Kourilsky 106).

Collage/montage is, of course, a classic modernist technique, subverting established modes of mimetic production and inducing new modes of perception. Significantly, Schumann avoided merging these diverse materials into an organic unity. Rather than synchronizing this theatrical collage (form, material, image, sound, movement, light and music) into a Piscatorian political *Gesamtkunstwerk* or rather than building up pathetic affect in the manner of an Eisensteinian montage of attractions, he preferred the quiet succession of images, the incongruous collage of signifiers, the dissonances of materials, and the general separation of elements. The result was highly Brechtian. Brecht too insisted on the strict separation of theatrical elements. As he asserted in his foundational essay on non-Aristotelian dramaturgy “Notes to Mahagonny,” in epic drama each episode should stand on its own, allowing the spectator to evaluate it independent of its teleological function within the overall narrative (*Werke*, vol. xxiv, 78-79). In Brechtian manner, Schumann's collages of diverse materials and signifiers (e.g. the airplane with shark teeth, the makeshift musical instruments) thus redirected the audience's attention from the outcome to the theatrical process itself.

Concurrently Schumann's complexly textured tableaux were also distant echoes of one of the key methods of Brechtian aesthetics, of the *Gestus*. Roland Barthes once aptly described this method as presenting a series of “pregnant moments,” i.e. “a gesture or a set of gestures (but never gesticulation) in which a whole social situation could be read” (73-74). However, in contrast to Brecht's clearly delineated social *Gestus* (which reflected his belief in the feasibility of scientific-objective representation), Schumann's rich imagery defied narrative closure. The masks, costumes, and movements of his puppets intimated an excess of meaning beyond the concrete political comment at hand—meaning that could neither

be contained in the creative nor the interpretative act. In the fashion of medieval morality plays, its fables of good and evil transcended the easy political analogy (cf. *King Story*), examining and questioning apparently universal and archetypal patterns of human behavior. This was even more apparent in Schumann's indoor performances of the 60s, which allowed him to elaborate the traveling tableaux of the street parades. With *Fire* (1966), Schumann created—through mime, imagery, sound, and light—a concise fable of the destruction wreaked by Western civilization on Asian peasant villages, which, as one review suggests, struck at the very core of Western identity:

All the theatre now is in darkness. The play is over and everyone knows it, yet no one applauds or moves. The silence is ours as well as theirs. We are unwilling to part with it. Finally the houselights are turned on. Some few clap their hands. Others move shufflingly. We make our way to the door, walking like convalescents (Dennison, qtd. in S. Brecht 653).

Another critic similarly wrote about *Chairs* (1968), a choreographic commentary on the nexus of materialism and militarism in Johnson's Great Society program:

The images of Bread and Puppet haunt one for weeks afterward. I still find it hard to forget the dead, passive, gaping faces that peered into mine as Lyndon Johnson's words were perfunctorily reproduced in the piece called 'Chairs.' . . . As we listen to sentiments about peace and sacrifice, we receive stark impressions of the deadly realities the words are trying to divert from us. . . . It is a piece charged with political contempt but with all its anger mysteriously subdued. It's something like being hit on the head with a hammer wrapped in cottonwool (Marowitz, qtd. in S. Brecht 682).

Clearly, the dense imagery and symbolism of Schumann's shows not only triggered a spontaneous visceral but also a profound critical reaction in the audience, effectively combining the vernacular impulse of political theater with its modernist one.

Bread and Puppet refunctioned Brecht's model of political theater, moving beyond the former's demand that political theater ought to provide its spectator with a "praktikables Weltbild," a "workable picture of the world" (*Brecht on Theatre* 133; Brecht, *Werke*, vol. xxii/i, 550). Unlike Brecht, Schumann did not attempt to elucidate the workings of capital with his multi-layered theatrical allegories; neither did he seek to inspire his audience with revolutionary fervor as Piscator did. His multi-layered, archaic allegories, while grounded in a concrete political reality, suggested an open-ended interpretative process and stressed the need for a creative and communal problem solving process. "It is the frisson of

ambiguity, the bit of unclarity about what exactly an object represents, that allows the political theater of Bread and Puppet its possibilities of subtlety, of inexactness, of open-ended interpretation," John Bell asserts (47). While such fundamental ambiguity might not have triggered immediate political action, it nevertheless indicated the political desire to open up imaginative space in which a utopian alternative could be thought and created. In contrast to other political theater groups of the time with which Bread and Puppet shared the global rejection and outright moral denunciation of capitalism, it did not posit a concrete political program for a systematic restructuring of society, but accomplished part of its ideological work via stimulating the utopian imagination of its audience. As evident from his production of *Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF* in 1995, Schumann continues to successfully employ this method for political commentary well beyond the 60s.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, in the work of Bread and Puppet, we encounter an entirely new notion of what constitutes the political. In contrast to the political theater of the 1930s, the emphasis is no longer on the clear elucidation of socio-economic facts and context, nor on the mobilization of the audience to concrete action, but on stimulating the collective political imagination—the utopian promise of which was already contained in the evocation of a counter-collective at least for the time of performance. Drawing on modernist and vernacular modes of representation, Bread and Puppet combines the modernist emphasis on formal innovation and resistance to aesthetic conventions with the vernacular recognition of the need for providing a sentimental education to the broad public by appealing to the prevalent populist sensibility.

Because of its use of folkloristic material and popular techniques (puppets, circus, morality play) and emphasis on the collective, Bread and Puppet has been variously described as the forerunner of postmodern political theater (see Baner). Its effective combination of a modernist agenda with vernacular techniques might corroborate this thesis. But at the same time, it also underlines the fundamentally modernist attitude of the group. Using cheap and readily available materials from everyday culture and relying on voluntary community participation, Bread and Puppet could afford to remain on the margins of American culture and thereby to largely avoid the aesthetic and political compromises imposed by commercial venues and evident in the work of most professional leftist theaters of the 1930s. Conversely, it was this position of aesthetic semi-autonomy that enabled Bread and Puppet to fervently espouse and embody the notion of theater as a counter-public. Moreover, its rhetoric of counter-hegemonic community needed in fact the constant reference to and deliberate juxtaposition with precisely the commodity culture it condemned. Consider for instance Bread and Puppet's participation in the Coney Island carnival in the late 60s. Here their storefront theater attracted a mass audience, precisely because it offered a temporary relief from the entertainment surplus of adjacent attractions. In other words, it was able to

set itself off from the surrounding carnival of commodity culture only by virtue of already being part of it. The reflection about this dual relationship to mass culture was however completely missing from the rhetoric of Bread and Puppet. It is this inability (or unwillingness) to reflect upon its own precarious cultural positioning that marks it as late-modernist rather than postmodernist political theater.

The question to ask in conclusion is why the American political theater of the 60s was finally able to use and refunction the European modernist tradition for its own praxis. As indicated earlier, having become institutionalized in museums and universities, modernism was, first of, all much more readily available to theater producers and consumers than it was in the 30s. Second, it is also fair to assume that if the 60s represented a moment of general cultural and political disruption—"a disruption of late-capitalist ideological and political hegemony, . . . of the bourgeois dream of unproblematic production, of everyday life as the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption, of the end of history," as it has been described by leftist critics<sup>19</sup>—then this disruption surely articulated itself not only politically but also aesthetically, opening up a site for formal innovation and experimentation. Like the Beats before them, the generation of artists emerging in the 60s postulated the radical break with what they considered oppressive moral, political, and aesthetic values of their parent generation. In the words of Ron Davis, "In rejecting the bourgeois theatre, little theatre, regional theatre and the communist old left, we lifted ourselves out of the stagnation of the fifties. Unencumbered by party, program or theory we practiced escaping from the bourgeois doldrums" (28). This overall sense of cultural rebellion and ideological departure was further enhanced by worldwide political upheavals. In the Third World, the colonial empire was collapsing and, at home, the civil rights and anti-war movement contested the very foundations of capitalism. Along with civil rights, student, women's, anti-war, and Third World liberation movements, a new group of political activists entered the political stage who no longer simply demanded to share institutional power with capital (as did the labor movement of the 30s), but demanded control over the various state apparatuses. If there was any coherence to what is known as the 60s, it constituted what Jameson describes as a "momentous transformational period" in which a systemic restructuring of capitalism took place (207). I would like to suggest that in this moment of transformation commonly referred to as the 60s, the classic paradigms of rupture and renewal so typical for modernist aesthetics were now much more readily available to artists and audiences alike than in the 30s.

Respectively, it also needs to be pointed out that while the general cultural and political climate fostered modernist experimentation in political theater, the classic model developed by Brecht and Piscator was no longer capable of fully explaining the ongoing global and local transformations. As Jameson also points out, it was not only capitalism that underwent a crisis in the 60s, but also



the ideology of the Left. While the new social forces (women, blacks, students, postcolonials, etc.) opened up new possibilities for political struggle, they were no longer explicable solely and entirely in terms of the traditional Marxist class dichotomy (ibid.). New interpretive models and new modes of political representation (other than those of class struggle) needed to be found. It is precisely here that the classic modernist political theater failed, since it operated entirely with the category of class and could not account for the various new social forces and their idiosyncratic political agendas. It is therefore surprising that Bread and Puppet, which as I have argued earlier already significantly modified the modernist political theater, still adhered to its old class rhetoric and did not yet venture into, let's say, questions of gender and sexuality (the latter were, for instance, on the agenda of the Living Theater). The work of Bread and Puppet thus points to an inner contradiction at the heart of the late modernist political theater of the 60s: while it significantly transformed the classic model of political theater in terms of form and audience approach, it adhered to it in terms of its basic interpretative method. In order to effectively imitate the newly emergent political realities, it had to transcend its own oppositional stance and begin to realize the complex diversities of political subjectivities in its own rhetoric. This was the step postmodernist political theater was to take.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am hereby mainly referring to the predominant conception of the political as primarily form-based, put forth in such seminal studies as Peter Szondi's *Theorie des modernen Dramas 1880-1950* (1953) and Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Die Entdeckung des Zuschauers* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> For German original see Brecht. *Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*. Vol. xxiv, 115. See also subsequent pages in both editions for explication of "non-Aristotelian" dramaturgy.

<sup>3</sup> See reviews in *Werke*, vol. xxiv, 184.

<sup>4</sup> For excerpts from the extensive correspondence between Brecht and Theater Union concerning the aesthetic and political principles of Brecht's play see *Werke*, vol. xxviii, 520-23, as well as Baxandall, Lee. "Brecht in America, 1935." *TDR* 12:1 (Fall 1967): 69-87 and Lyon, James K. "Der Briefwechsel zwischen Bertolt Brecht und der New Yorker Theatre Union von 1935," 136-155.

<sup>5</sup> For Brecht's text see "Die Mutter" in *Werke*, vol. 3, as well as Willett's translation "The Mother" in *Collected Plays*, vol. 3/2. Peters's adaptation remains unpublished but is available as a manuscript at the Brecht Archive of the Akademie der Künste Berlin. The New York Public Library Theater Collection holds a second manuscript. The opening sequence of the Peters adaptation has been published in Brecht's annotations to "Die Mutter" (*Werke*, vol. xxiv, 164-169).

<sup>6</sup> Translation mine. Benjamin 45: "ein soziologisches Experiment zur Revolutionierung der Mutter."

<sup>7</sup> Despite such fundamental conceptual and structural differences, Brecht surprisingly agreed to a staging of his play in New York. Together with Eisler he attended rehearsals, hoping to be able to correct the adaptation according to his principles of Epic Theater. Besides objecting to the structural changes Peters had undertaken, Brecht and Eisler also disliked the acting and staging method. Most actors had been trained in the Stanislavsky method (or rather Strasberg's adaptation of it), which meant that they tended to infuse their characters with an inner life and psychological depth that was simply not there. Victor Wolfson, a young and inexperienced director, likewise approached *Mother* from the conventional emotional angle, intent on bringing out his melodramatic story line and preserving the illusion of the fourth wall at any cost. He did not, for instance, consider the songs as independent theoretical commentaries to be set off from the scenes, but as illustrations of dramatic action and expressions of a character's inner life. All in all, his treatment of music was very much in the tradition of the American music theater, but had nothing to do with Epic Theater.

<sup>8</sup> See the guidelines established by the American Writers' Congress of 1935 in Hart.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the professional leftist theater, which were after all dependent on the box office, the various amateur workers' theater groups (most significantly the Workers' Laboratory Theater and the Proletbühne) which prospered in the late 20s and early 30s successfully engaged modernist concepts of political theater. Agitprop and epic drama proved to be an effective means of educating and agitating the audience (the influence of which is evident in *Odets' Waiting for Lefty*). Likewise the Living Newspaper of the Federal Theater Project also displayed a great degree of epic theatricality. Yet, it was precisely their relative independence from the dictates of the commercial Broadway circuit that enabled these two non-profit theaters to do so.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* on the widespread replacement of the category of class with the category of race by many recent immigrants. On middlebrow aesthetics see Radway, "Scandal of the Middlebrow," and Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*.

<sup>11</sup> *We, the People* was the title of a popular Broadway play by Elmer Rice (1933).

<sup>12</sup> On sentimental education and middlebrow aesthetics see Radway, *A Feeling for Books*.

<sup>13</sup> I am here referring to the works of Eva Goldbeck ("Principles of 'Educational' Theater." *New Masses*, 1935), Mordecai Gorelik (*New Theatres for Old*, 1940), Eric Bentley (*Theory of the Modern Stage*, 1968), and John Willett (*Brecht on Theatre*, 1964), who, in a number of articles and translations, promoted and elucidated Brecht's principles of Epic Theater in the U.S. Charles Laughton's brilliant *Galilei* interpretation in Beverly Hills in 1947 and Marc Blitzstein's triumphant *Threepenny Opera* revival in 1954 further

helped to pave the way on the American stage. The latter ran for seven years and over 2,000 performances, becoming one of the great Broadway hits of the time.

<sup>14</sup> As Carl Weber points out, it was particularly the late Brecht that attracted American theaters: *Galilei*, *Mother Courage*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* – in other words, those plays that were closest to their own dramatic conventions (the list is supplemented by an occasional revival of *Threepenny Opera*, which, ever since Louis Armstrong's rendition of "Mac, the Knife," has been a safe commodity of American entertainment).

<sup>15</sup> See panel discussion among Davis, Valdez, Schumann, Svendsen in *.Radical Theatre Festival* 16-44

<sup>16</sup> During its active participation in the anti-war movement, we have only occasional references to actual locations or actions (e.g. the bombing of the village of Ben Suc in *Johnny Comes Marching Home*, Johnson's state of the union address of 1967 in *Speech*).

<sup>17</sup> In an interview Schumann declared: "Ce que nous voulons c'est ouvrir quelque chose. Non pas inventer un problème et essayer de le résoudre, mais inventer un problème et le laisser là. [...] Ce que nous faisons n'est pas un travail d'interprétation sur la situation dans laquelle nous vivons ou sur le système que nous subissons, c'est une 'sensibilité à' qui vient du coeur tout entier et complètement engagée. Nous n'avons pas de solution pour le théâtre," ("What we want is to open up something. Not to invent a problem and to attempt to resolve it, but to invent a problem and to leave it at that. What we do is not a work of interpreting the situation we live in or of the system we subsist under, but it is a 'sensitivity for,' which comes entirely from the heart and is full of commitment. We do not have solutions for the theater") (qtd. in S. Brecht 580; translation mine).

<sup>18</sup> Although Bread and Puppet has since the late 60s increasingly shifted its focus from political theater work to the staging of more general humanist and Christian themes (*Our Domestic Resurrection Circus*).

<sup>19</sup> Such as by the editors of Social Text in their introduction to *The 60s Without Apology*, 2.

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———— **ABSTRACT:** ————

Translations into Turkish from Western literature and philosophy proved to be among the strongest driving forces for a new Turkey in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in a political and a cultural sense, and as imagined and constructed by the intellectual elite of the country.