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32. BRECHT’S LEHRSTÜCKE AND DRAMA EDUCATION

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The term Lehrstücke, or learning-plays, describes a series of experimental works written in the 1920s and early 1930s by Bertolt Brecht and a number of collaborators, including Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Elisabeth Hauptmann. The intention behind writing and performing these experimental plays was not necessarily to culminate in a finished, final product to be replicated exactly during each performance. Rather, the ideal Lehrstück performance is also something of a rehearsal, or, as Frederic Jameson (1998) describes it, “one continuous master class” (p. 62–63). Jameson suggests that the process of acting in a Lehrstück is the end result: “the decision to act out this particular gesture; or not to act it out, or to act out its opposite—now proves to be the annulment of difference on another, and perhaps even more basic, one: namely, that between actors and public” (p. 65). As performer and audience are synthesized, this opens up a new realm of possibilities for action and choice within the framework of the play.

In experimenting with the fundamental dynamics of the stage through the Lehrstück, Brecht dissolves the difference between player and spectator, and instead advocates a “große Pädagogik” which “only recognizes actors who are simultaneously students” (Brecht, 2003, p. 88). Whereas difference is eradicated in terms of actor/spectator, it is highlighted in the potentials open to the characters within the world of the drama. In focusing not on one final product, but rather on the process of artistic development as in a rehearsal, the Lehrstück aims to bring about a kind of self-realization in those taking part. Brecht suggested that “[t]hese experiments were theatrical performances meant not so much for the spectator as for those who were engaged in the performance. It was, so to speak, art for the producer, not art for the consumer” (Brecht, 1964, p. 80). As this essay explains through an examination of the process and development of the 1930–31 Lehrstücke for young audiences, Der Jasager (He Who Says Yes or, He Said Yes) and Der Neinsager (He Who Says No or, He Said No), audience members were empowered as they became engaged in the process of production. As such, Brecht’s Lehrstück-theory can be useful to both practitioners of theatre for young audiences and its scholarly community.

While children factor into Brecht’s ideas on pedagogy and theatre, the Lehrstücke are not traditionally thought of as children’s theatre; only Der Jasager and Der Neinsager were written for young people. Much of Brecht’s Lehrstück-theory deals with adult participants, both as performers and audience members, yet these ideas
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can and should be applied to new works for young audiences. In his essay “Theory of Pedagogies,” Brecht writes that “young people should be educated by play-acting,” a pedagogical method that turns actors “into people who are simultaneously active and contemplative,” creating student-actors who are equal parts learner and performer (Brecht, 2003, p. 89). This distinction does not imply that a performance will take place in the traditional sense, but rather privileges education and process over a final product:

By virtue of the fact that young people, when performing, carry out actions which they themselves scrutinize, they are educated for the state. These performances must be invented and executed in such a way that the state benefits. What decides the value if a sentence, or a gesture or an action, is thus not beauty, but whether the state benefits if the performers speak that sentence, carry out that gesture and proceed to take that action (p. 89).

Brecht abandons a traditional system of value judgment for the theatre, and instead shifts the focus toward theatre’s usefulness for society and the state, encouraging a pragmatic pedagogy through rehearsal-performance of the Lehrstück. Roswitha Mueller (1994) notes that, “the historical basis for the Lehrstücke is a society in transition to socialism. Within this context, the central concern is to find ways of learning that are adequate for the new state” (p. 82). Brecht’s texts do not reiterate a larger goal of teaching a specific idea; rather, they teach how to think, or, as Mueller paraphrases Reiner Steinweg, “the Lehre is to be understood not as ‘recipes for political action,’ but as the teaching of dialectics as a method of thinking” (Mueller, 1994, p. 85).

Brecht’s major accomplishment with the Lehrstücke is not rooted in specific ideology (particularly Marxism) transmitted through plots, but rather as Jameson notes, his “doctrine is simply the method itself” (Jameson, 1998, p. 99). An examination of Brecht’s Lehrstücke reveals many examples the student-actor can follow in the space of the performance-rehearsal or master class. The characters within Lehrstücke are asked to make and execute critical life-changing decisions. The dialogue is often comprised of explanations for why characters made the decisions they did; for example, in Die Maßnahme (The Measures Taken), a group of communist agitators from Russia illustrate and explain why they killed their comrade. The Lehrstück structure encourages the performer to both enact and examine his or her character’s actions. In Der Jasager the young protagonist decides, in the first version of the play, to let himself be killed, but in Der Neinsager he rejects this idea, and describes his reasons for doing so.

Der Jasager and Der Neinsager are based on the 15th century Japanese Noh play Taniko; Brecht’s adaptations were written between 1930 and 1931. The original version of Der Jasager was composed as an opera for students for which Kurt Weill composed the score. The play was rewritten twice: Brecht created Der Neinsager as a response to the earlier play, and then later rewrote Der Jasager. Neither Der Neinsager nor the rewrite of Der Jasager were set to music. Brecht wanted the two versions of Der Jasager to be performed together with Der Neinsager, as a trilogy. However, the opera Der Jasager and Der Neinsager only appeared together once