

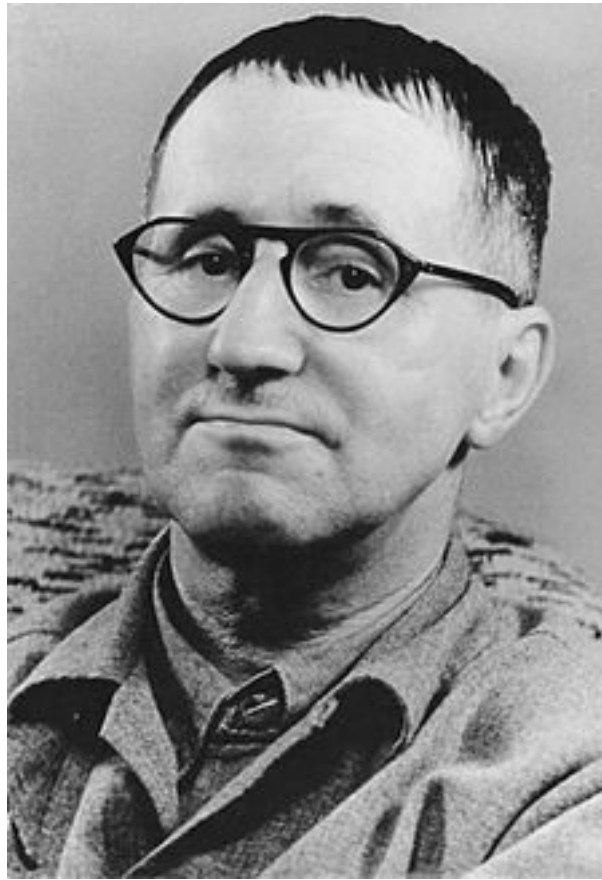
*The Good Woman of
Setzuan*

by
Bertolt Brecht

translated by Eric Bentley

Theatre Pro Rata
October 26-November 10, 2013
Intermedia Arts

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)



- Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria; his family was comfortably middle class. He was 16 when World War I broke out, but initially avoided military service by registering for a medical course at Munich University in 1917. Once there, he studied drama and became an admirer of dramatist Frank Wedekind. He was drafted in August 1918 but was posted back to Augsburg as a medical orderly.
- Brecht began publishing newspaper articles in July 1916; his first theatre criticism appeared in October 1919. His first full-length play, *Baal*, was written in 1918. In 1922, influential Berlin critic Herbert Ihering, in response to Brecht's first produced play, *Drums in the Night*, wrote, "At 24 the writer Bert Brecht has changed Germany's literary complexion overnight." In 1924, he collaborated with novelist/playwright Lion Feuchtwanger on an adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, which marked an important stage in his development. During the years of the Weimer Republic (1925-1933), Brecht was actively involved in several dramatic and writing collectives. In 1927, Brecht first collaborated with Kurt Weill (*The Threepenny Opera*, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*).

- Brecht left Germany in 1933 when Hitler took power; he lived in Denmark for six years, then Sweden and Finland for shorter periods. He received a visa to enter the United States in May 1941. During the war years, he expressed his opposition to National Socialism and Fascism in his most well-known plays, including *Galileo*, *Mother Courage*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.
- After the war, Brecht was among those blacklisted in Hollywood (where he had written screenplays during the war years); he testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, and returned to Europe the day after his testimony. An offer of his own theatre (completed in 1954) and theatre company (the Berliner Ensemble) persuaded him to return to Berlin in 1949. He wrote few plays in his final years, but devoted himself to developing the next generation of directors. He died of a heart attack in 1956 and is buried in Berlin.
- *Guardian* critic Michael Billington's introduction to Brecht (December 2011): <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/dec/21/bertolt-brecht-a-z-modern-drama>.

The Good Woman of Setzuan

- The play (in German: *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*), written in collaboration with Margarete Steffin and Ruth Berlau, was begun in 1938 but not completed until 1943.
- Originally, Brecht planned to call the play, *The Product Love* (*Die Were Liebe*), meaning "love as a commodity"; the title was a play on words—the German term for "true love" (*Die wahre Liebe*) is pronounced the same. It was first performed in 1943 at the Zurich Schauspielhaus in Switzerland with a musical score and songs by Swiss composer Huldreich Georg Früh.
- The story follows Shen Te, who offers her home to three visiting gods after several other citizens of Setzuan have refused. They reward her goodness with sufficient funds for her to purchase a shop of her own. She then attempts to continue to be generous to members of her community, but finds that she is being exploited by them; she turns to her cousin, Shui Ta, who takes a firmer stance in order to help the business succeed. The story reveals the divide between the desire to be a good person, and the challenges such a person faces in a fallen world driven by implacable market forces.

From Eric Bentley's commentary on the play; following his summary of the story, he notes:

- In other words, it is impossible to be good, in the traditional sense of altruistic, gentle, loving, in a world that lives by egoism, rapacity, and hate. A Christian might argue: "You can't change the world. All you can do is to exercise the Christian virtues in your own small circle."
- Brecht replies: "This is topsy-turvy reasoning. Your small circle is no circle but a segment of a large circle. The segment has no independence. It can move only when the whole circle moves. *Only* by altering the world can goodness become practical."
- Shen Te wished to be kind. But on one occasion she finds herself allowing an old couple to be ruined because she does not pay her debt to them. On another occasion she will not help a poor man to find redress for an injury willfully inflicted by the barber Shu Fu because at the time she is trying to win Shu Fu's lucrative hand.
- In order to survive, the good girl needs the assistance of the brutal exploiter. And when she appeals to the gods she receives as answer: "Are we to confess that our laws are lethal? Are we to repudiate our laws? Never! Is the world to be changed? How? By whom? No: everything is all right."
- An interesting local note: the play (along with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) was first published in English translation in *Parables for the Theatre*, by the University of Minnesota Press in 1948, which leased paperback rights to Grove Press in New York and London. This became the best known of all Brecht books in English-speaking countries. *The Good Woman* had its American premiere at Hamline University in spring 1948; *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* had its premiere that spring as well—at Carleton College in Northfield.

Eric Bentley (translator)

- Eric Bentley (born 1916) is a critic, playwright, singer, editor, and translator. He first met Brecht in 1941 in Santa Monica, California. Bentley was teaching at UCLA at the time, and they subsequently became friends and collaborators.
- Bentley translated many of Brecht's works and edited their Grove Press editions. He also recorded two albums of Brecht's songs for Folkways Records, most of which had never before been recorded in English. *New York Times* journalist Jonathan Kalb wrote an appreciation of Bentley on his 90th birthday in 2006 (<http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/11/12/theater/12kalb.html>).

Brechtian Theatre

Epic Theatre [from Wikipedia]

- **Epic theatre** (German: *episches Theater*) was a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20th century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners, including Erwin Piscator, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and, most famously, Bertolt Brecht.
- Although many of the concepts and practices involved in Brechtian epic theatre had been around for years, even centuries, Brecht unified them, developed the style, and popularized it. Epic theatre incorporates a mode of acting that utilizes what he calls *gestus*. The epic form describes both a type of written drama and a methodological approach to the production of plays: “Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name ‘epic.’” (Drain, *20th Century Theatre: a Sourcebook*). Brecht later preferred the term “dialectical theatre,” which he discussed in his work, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*.
- One of the goals of epic theatre is for the audience to always be aware that it is watching a play: “It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion.” (Ekstein, *Rites of Spring*)
- Epic theatre was a reaction against popular forms of theatre, particularly the naturalistic approach pioneered by Constantin Stanislavski. Like Stanislavski, Brecht disliked the shallow spectacle, manipulative plots, and heightened emotion of melodrama; but where Stanislavski attempted to engender real human behavior in acting through the techniques of Stanislavski’s system and to absorb the audience completely in the fictional world of the play, Brecht saw Stanislavski’s methodology as producing escapism.
- Brecht’s own social and political focus departed also from surrealism and the Theatre of Cruelty, as developed in the writings and dramaturgy of Antonin Artaud, who sought to affect audiences viscerally, psychologically, physically, and irrationally.

Parable

The Good Woman of Setzuan and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* were originally published together in a volume called *Parables for the Theatre: Two Plays*.

[from Ronald Spiers, *Modern Dramatists: Bertolt Brecht*]

- The genre of parable lent itself to Brecht's conception of 'demonstrational theatre' in a number of ways. The parable, so he explained to Walter Benjamin, was a form of writing in which the imagination was kept accountable to reason, the tendency toward autonomy of the aesthetic impulse being held in check by the obligation to write what was useful.
- For Brecht it was a genre that aimed at transparency: the surface of specific events and characters served to point beyond (or behind) itself towards general, 'abstract' meanings it illustrated 'concretely'. Because it does not pretend to be anything other than a made-up story, clearly told to advance an argument, parable has the kind of naïve relation to reality that Brecht thought was an important quality of Epic Theatre; the opposite of naiveté in this sense is naturalism, where the artist seeks to create the illusion that what his work shows *is* reality.

Alienation effect [from Wikipedia]

- The **distancing effect**, more commonly known (earlier) by John Willett's 1964 translation the **alienation effect** or (more recently) as the **estrangement effect** (German: *Verfremdungseffekt*), is a performing arts concept coined by playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht first used the term in an essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" published in 1936, in which he described it as "playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play."
- "Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious."
- "In 1935 Brecht took a sojourn from Denmark to Leningrad and Moscow. It was in Moscow that Brecht saw the *jingju* (Chinese opera) performer Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) who fully embodied Brecht's theory of acting, in which the actor consciously presents the behavior of the character on the stage. This examination by the actor of the character prevented the complete transformation of an actor into the role, creating instead a portrayal that included both emotional empathy and analytical distance." (Martin and Bial, Introduction, *Brecht Sourcebook*)

Gestus [from Wikipedia]

- **Gestus** is an acting technique developed by the German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht. It carries the sense of a combination of physical gesture and “gist” or attitude. It is a means by which “an attitude or single aspect of an attitude” is revealed, insofar as it is “expressible in words or actions” (John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*).
- **Gestus**, as the embodiment of an attitude, carries at least two distinct meanings in Brecht’s theatre: first, the uncovering or revealing of the motivations and transactions that underpin a dramatic exchange between the characters; and second, the “epic” narration of that character by the actor (whether explicitly or implicitly).
- In the first sense, that of anatomizing the character, a **Gestus** reveals a specific *aspect* of a character: rather than his metaphysical, subconscious or other psychological dimensions, a **Gestus** makes visible a character’s social relations and the causality of his behavior, as interpreted from an historical materialist perspective. “Every emotion” when treated under the rubric of **Gestus**, Elizabeth Wright explains, “manifests itself as a set of social relations” (*Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation*). “For it is what happens *between* people,” Brecht insists, “that provides them with all the material that they can discuss, criticize, alter” (“A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*).
- In the second sense, the actor’s attitude as embodied in acting as an act of epic narration (the ‘showing’ that is ‘shown’ in the ‘showing’, in Brecht’s turn of phrase), Brecht refers to the “political” basis from which an actor interprets his role and its place within the storytelling scheme of the production as a whole. “[T]he choice of viewpoint is also a major element of the actor’s art, and it has to be decided outside the theatre” Brecht explains in his “A Short Organum.” In this sense of the clarification and embodiment of a particular interpretative perspective, **Gestus** is related to Brecht’s other important practical tool, the *Fabel* (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabel>).
- A **Gestus** is not a cliché or “rubber stamp”; the actor develops a character’s **Gestus** through a process of exploration of concrete physical behavior and according to a principle of selective realism. The post-Brechtian German theatre practitioner Heiner Müller (who ran Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble for a short while) argues that “[r]eflecting the actions through the figures, mentally as well as emotionally, also has the character of citation. The citation geste (**Gestus**) must not diminish the intensity and spontaneity of reactions. Identification in the details with estrangement of the whole” (“The Geste of Citation” in *Germania*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer).

Some issues and questions to consider about *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

Can a person really be good in the world of the play? How well does Shen Te succeed? Can a person really be good in our world?

If everyone pretends to be good to achieve their goals, how can you determine any genuine altruism?

What are the different ways in which the characters “play the game” of being good or honest in order to get their own way?

Brecht describes the pretense of piety or goodness exhibited by his characters: how do you imagine he wants the audience to respond?

What have the gods discovered on their journey? What role do they play in the structure of the story?

Wong the water-seller introduces us to the world of the play: how does his character illuminate the elements of the story and of Shen Te’s plight?

Brecht believed that it was important for an audience to approach a play through both their intellect and their emotions, and to be aware that they were watching a play. How does his approach affect you as a member of his audience? What ideas and possibilities does this play convey?

Brecht’s work is intended to move the audience to action in the world: what kind of action does *Good Woman* encourage in those who see it?

Brecht’s gods love observing the people—and searching for good ones—yet seem incapable of any truly effective action. Can you see ways in which this mirrors our current political situation? What action can people take to improve our own lot when we are abandoned or ignored by those in power?

Some notable quotes

- Brecht considered life as a dialectic between rudimentary existence and the complexity of living: “First comes eating, then morality” (“Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral”) is Brecht’s famous maxim, explored in different ways in many of his plays.

–Carol Martin and Henry Bial, Introduction, *Brecht Sourcebook*

- During the Stalinist era, *The Good Woman* presented a good picture of current tendencies in Soviet society, with Shui Ta as the necessary “realistic” correction of the earlier idealism, and Yan Sun as eventually a high Party functionary, rising by the path of Stahanovism. More permanently, the two sides of Shen Te, as they arise from the divided nature of Brecht, express such a division for all of us—and the tendency thereto which exists *in* all of us.

–Eric Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries*

- In the Chinese theatre the “alienation effect” is achieved in the following way. The Chinese performer does not act as if, in addition to the three walls around him there were also a fourth wall. He makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at. Thus, one of the illusions of the European stage is set aside. The audience forfeits the illusion of being unseen spectators at an event which is really taking place. The European stage has worked out an elaborate technique by which the fact that the scenes are so arranged as to be easily seen by the audience is concealed. The Chinese approach renders this technique superfluous. As openly as acrobats the actors can choose those positions which show them off to best advantage.

–Bertolt Brecht, “On Chinese Theatre”

- For art to be “unpolitical” means only to ally itself with the “ruling” group.

–Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre”

Resources

Scripts

The Good Woman of Setzuan, revised English version by Eric Bentley. New York: Grove Press, 1966.

The Good Person of Szechwan, translated from the German by John Willett, edited by John Willett and Ralph Mannheim. New York: Arcade Publishing, revised 1985.

Related material

Eric Bentley. *The Brecht Commentaries 1943-1986*. New York: Grove Press, 1981.

Michael Billington, "Bertolt Brecht: irresistible force or forgotten chapter in theatrical history?" *The Guardian*, 18 September 2013.

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/sep/18/bertolt-brecht-arturo-ui-revival>

Margaret Eddersaw. *Performing Brecht: Forty Years of British Performances*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Carol Martin and Henry Bial. *Brecht Sourcebook*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Ronald Speirs. *Bertolt Brecht* (Modern Dramatists Series). New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

Peter Thomson & Glendyr Sacks. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

I need no gravestone, but
If you need one for me
I would like it to bear these words:
He made suggestions. We
Carried them out.
Such an inscription would
Honor us all.

Bertolt Brecht