

Selective Brechtianism: Reworking Mother Savage for the German Stage

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Abstract: My bilingual (German/English) production of Travelling Light Theatre Company's (UK) work *Mother Savage* for the Studiobühne Essen (Germany) in 2012 became a dialogue with Brechtian theatre techniques, and an examination of their relevance in the contemporary theatre. The production utilised a Brechtian design aesthetic, which also questioned the concept of *Historisierung* (historicisation). The emotionally-restrained acting style was an extended exploration of Brecht's concept of *Gestus*, the socially-determined action, in that the story of the 90-minute piece was told predominantly through physical gesture. Our new production of a devised, largely physical-theatre work originally created by another company, can be compared to Brecht's *Modellbuch* (model-book) idea. Production choices, such as extended silence and a slow, drawn-out dramaturgical tempo, toyed with the boundaries of performer and audience comfort. This discomfort provoked spectators to observe closely and assess the action critically – demonstrating that, with some adjustments, Brecht's approaches to performance can still have a strong impact.

Keywords: Brechtian theatre, *Gestus*, *Historisierung*, *Modellbuch*, physical theatre.

Introduction

A few years ago I read American director Anne Bogart's account of her first experience directing in Germany, during which she "resolved to speak only German and to try to work like a German director." [Bogart 2001: 13] Because she wasn't working from a base of who she was authentically, and she didn't provide a "solid form for the actors to push against", she claims that "the results were disastrous" [Bogart 2001: 14]. So when I was invited

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to direct a production for the Studiobühne Essen (in Germany) in 2012 a key question when selecting a play was: what can I bring to the company that only *I* can bring – as an Antipodean and non-native German speaker?

There have been two key through-lines in my theatre directing thus far. One has been bilingual productions, due to my love of text and language-play – I find that the fun is doubled when you have two languages to play with! The second is my preoccupation with physical theatre methodologies, particularly in their application to scripted plays, which I have been experimenting with for the last 10 years. This meant that I had no concerns about providing a “form for the actors to push against”, though I had to take into account that both of these aspects were new territory for the Studiobühne. The company sent me a number of plays, which they thought might be suitable for our collaboration. The one which arrested my attention was *Mutter Furie*, a translation (into German) of a recent production, *Mother Savage* by Travelling Light Theatre company. Travelling Light is based in Bristol in the UK, and specialises in productions for children and youth. I was not aware of this focus when reading the play, as it read just as well as a work for adults; and we had not intended to create a work for a youth audience specifically.

What appealed to me about the piece was that the story was told predominately through physical action – with at least half the script consisting of stage directions – and this provided an opportunity to further my ongoing explorations into Brechtian directing, in particular into *Gestus*, the socially-conditioned action. While I consider myself to be a Brechtian theatre director, in that I am more interested in how an actor’s performance *reads* to an audience than in the actors’ internal process in performance, and I tend to examine social/political themes, I had never directed an entire production with an *explicitly* Brechtian approach. The action-based script and its episodic structure encouraged me to focus specifically on *Gestus* and readability of action. Even when not directing in such an explicitly Brechtian style, as with this production of *Mutter Furie*¹ (*Mother Savage*), a key element of my rehearsal process is setting a strict, yet detailed, physical form for the action. In this production, other Brechtian concepts, such as those of the *Modellbuch* (model book) gained importance. *Mutter Furie* also extended my ongoing research into methodologies of directing physical theatre, by exploring through practice the question of how to make another company’s ‘physical theatre’ work my own.

¹ I will refer to our production by the German title, *Mutter Furie*, as that is the title it is performed under by the Studiobühne Essen. *Mother Savage* will be used to refer to Travelling Light’s production.

SELECTIVE BRECHTIANISM: REWORKING *MOTHER SAVAGE* FOR THE GERMAN STAGE



"Mutter Furie" - Deutsche Erstaufführung | Schauspiel nach einer Novelle von Guy de Maupassant, in einer Bearbeitung der Travelling Light Theatre Company, aus dem Englischen von Ulrike Hofmann | Regie: Bronwyn Tweddle, Neuseeland | Premiere: 21.03.2012 | Studio-Bühne Essen | Foto: Kerstin Plewa-Brodam ("Mutter Furie") | Aufnahme: Frank Vinken | Abdruck frei, nur im Kontext gestattet | www.studio-buehne-essen.de |

Brechtian Dramaturgy

While the attraction of the piece was the challenges of story-telling through non-verbal means, the story of *Mutter Furie* also has a typical Brechtian thematic: that of the choices we make in times of war, and the potential for reconciliation or revenge.

The original source for the work was a short story about the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian war by Guy de Maupassant. In *La Mère Sauvage*, as the war nears its conclusion the victorious army occupies territory of the enemy they have been fighting. Four soldiers are billeted to live with an old woman, whose husband is dead and son is away fighting the very army that are occupying her house. Although, despite a language barrier, the men befriend her; when she receives news that her son has been killed in battle, she locks the soldiers in the house and burns it to the ground. In Travelling Light's performance version the four soldiers have been reduced to one, which intensifies the relationship. The company used the de Maupassant story to shed light on the more recent war in the former Yugoslavia, hinting at this more recent conflict by using Slavic music to underscore the action. The nature of their narrative is also more consciously circular than the original, beginning with the death of both the woman – who is executed by firing squad for killing the soldier – and the soldier – burned alive and accusing her of his murder – and returning to this image in the final moments of the play². In typically Brechtian fashion, as we know the ending from the beginning of the performance, a sense of suspense is not aroused. We therefore watch not wondering *what* will happen, but rather *how* and *why* it happens. One audience member said this gave her greater sympathy for the soldier, and that she felt sadness throughout the entire performance because she knew what would happen to him, despite his best efforts – and this underlying awareness was particularly highlighted in the lighter moments. It also relieved the tension in scenes where a vegetable knife was involved: while the soldier fears attack from the woman, the audience already knows that that is not how he will be killed, so his suspicion is read as unnecessary.

² In our performance, the beginning was not entirely the same as the ending however, for pragmatic reasons: as this would have meant that a key prop – the wild rabbit the soldier catches in the forest as gives the woman as a peace offering – would have been revealed too early. The house the soldier crafts out of paper part-way through, which burns on the table in the concluding scene as a stand-in for the house with the soldier in it is also not visible at the beginning.



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Other aspects of typically Brechtian dramaturgy already evident in *Travelling Lights*' script were the way the scenes are strung together in an episodic fashion, the use of scene titles³, and particularly the direct address to the audience. While many of the speeches could be addressed to the other character, despite not sharing a common language, some speeches explicitly acknowledge the audience's presence. One example of this is the soldier's monologue in scene 4, "Piano Practice", when he points out that the audience can't hear the music he hears in his head as he plays an imaginary piano. In our production, the letter the mother receives informing her of her son's death was also read directly to the audience, and she makes eye contact with the spectators at her the moment she makes the decision to kill the soldier.

Use of Brecht's Modellbuch Concept

In his later years, thanks to the photographic skills of Ruth Berlau, Brecht instituted the use of a *Modellbuch*, which is a "collection of photographs illustrating a complete production of a given play by the Berliner Ensemble, and kept there on loan for would-be producers" [Willett 1977: 21]. While not surprisingly "[s]ome producers would make a flat copy of the 'Model', perpetuating Brecht's mannerisms without showing their *raison d'être*" [Willett 1977: 162], Brecht actually saw virtue in the ability to make a lively copy, as the very nature of theatre is to make a copy of life, a copy of human behaviour: "Let me put forward my own experiences as a copyist: as playwright I have copied the Japanese, Greek and Elizabethan Drama; as producer the music-hall comedian Karl Valentin's groupings and Caspar Neher's stage sketches; yet I have never felt my freedom restricted. Give me an intelligent model of *King Lear*, and I will find it fun to carry out." [Willett 1964: 224] Thus Brecht saw copying as a necessary step in finding his own way as an artist, and John Willett expands on this: "Büchner and the Elizabethans gave him the example of a loose sequence of scenes of great geographical and chronological scope; Piscator showed him how to speed and amplify the story by mechanical means; the Japanese, through Waley, taught him to cut narrative corners, and 'deliver the contents' in a forceful yet unemotional way." [Willett 1977: 123]. However, he also suggested that in using a *Modellbuch* "the main effect of studying the solution of certain problems should be to make one aware of the problems themselves" [Willett 1977: 162 – 3]. Brecht

³ Though these did not all function to reduce suspense by revealing the entire action of the scene as in some of Brecht's plays.

wanted a director to examine the 'model' "to see exactly what problems Brecht was trying to solve in each detail of his production, and how he arrived at his answers, and then go... on to think out an approach of his own based on the same understanding of the play." [Willett 1983: xx].

While I wasn't working from a photographic documentation of the original production, our 'model' was a tightly-scripted series of actions from Travelling Light's performance text. The script itself, emerging from an ensemble-devising process, was quite detailed in its description of physical actions that needed to be carried out, so in effect we had our 'model' to work from. For me, this raised the artistic question: how do we make this work our own? There is no point in restaging a text, unless there we can bring a new perspective to it. So I used the playtext in the way Brecht saw his *Modellbücher* being used: I took it as a springboard which highlights the problems to be solved, but ensured we found our own solutions to these production questions. To begin with, and returning to the original question as to what I can uniquely offer a German company in directing for them, I chose to do the piece bilingually. In Travelling Light's original performance, the actors both speak English but with the theatrical convention that they are really 'speaking' different languages and can't understand each other. We literally had two different languages. Stephan Rumphorst, (who played the soldier) performed in English, while Kerstin Plewa-Brodam (playing the mother) spoke German. Despite the fact that we could assume that many in our audience would follow much of the English text, most were native German-speakers. Thus despite many stating they had empathy for the soldier, the language choice, and subsequent blocking decisions, meant that it 'read' very much as the story of the mother in this production. As Carl Weber explains, Brecht's "...whole view of the world was that it was changeable and the people in it were changing; every solution was only a starting point for a new, better, different solution." [Weber 2002: 85], so Travelling Light's 'model' was a starting point for a better solution for *our* audience.

Action Developed with Gestus

We began work on each scene by reading the directions for actions, trying them out to assess their purpose; and then I set structured improvisations to interrogate these actions further. These improvisations around the 'model' were my way into Brecht's notion of *Gestus* – the socially-conditioned action. Often I find that actors might be able to define what *Gestus* is, but struggle to *apply* it. This is because *Gestus* is not a defined acting technique, but rather a

way of looking at character. A *Gestus* is an end result, rather than a specific process or technique. *Gestus* is an expression by the actor which makes social relationships between the characters clear, summing up the social conventions, power hierarchies or economic pressures which force the character to behave as he or she does. To find the *Gestus* which is the best expression of a moment, an actor must ask: Who has power in this situation? What has economic value in this situation? What speaks for or against each choice open to the character? Which values influence the choice? And finally: How can all of this be demonstrated through physical action? *Gestus* can include physical gesture, posture, facial expression, vocal tone etc. and comes from idea that all a human does, feels, thinks and wishes is "...determined by the social position and history of a character" (Thomson and Sacks 1994: 182)" [cited in Thomson 2000: 110]. While a character acts as an individual, his or her action is also representative of all who face a similar situation, thus the actions are "both themselves and emblematic of larger social practices" [Martin and Bial 2000: 5].

One of the simple exercises we used to create physical detailing, and thereby *Gestus*, is to examine a simple task required by the script, such as falling asleep on a chair, in minute detail. In rehearsal, actors can tend to skim over actions specified. However, I find that by defining gestures in increasing levels of detail, they become meaningful, readable and theatrical in and of themselves. So, in searching for the *Gestus*, we break the action [falling asleep on a chair] into 5 segments, then 10 segments, sometimes even 20 or more segments. At each level of detail, each segment of the action is defined with clear beginnings and endings, so that they can be repeated exactly. Then with each segment we play with tempo, scale, direction of the action etc. using contrasts between the extremes of each of these elements to add colour to the moves. My role as the director is to guide these variations with an eye to the way the actions 'read' in terms of their significance in the social context of the scenes. Thus we created a very detailed 'ritual' of sleeping for the end of scene 3 – where, for the first time, a man and a woman who don't know each other, can't communicate linguistically, and see each other as the 'enemy', have to sleep in this same room. The ritual of sleeping shows the suspicion and attempts to protect themselves while undertaking this necessary action. The sleeping rituals were adjusted as they were repeated throughout the performance, to reflect the shifting relationship.

I would argue that this exercise is an appropriate (Brechtian) approach to creating *Gestus*, because it creates intriguing, readable actions. The key difference between a Stanislavskyan and a Brechtian approach to action is not necessarily the style of the action, but rather the *attitude* towards it. Whereas a

Stanislavskyan approach emphasizes the individual history and psychology leading to an action, Brecht focuses on social/political attitude to the action: characters are representative of society and their actions must be readable in terms of the social situation. The 'attitude' of the actors (and director) *towards* the action shifts, in that its selection as appropriate for the scene is assessed in terms of how it serves a *purpose* in explaining the social situation to the audience. Rumphorst (playing the soldier) found that dividing a movement into 5 or more steps made him more conscious of it as a performer. His consciousness of the action, and his resulting awareness of the separation of actor from character, led to a clearer presentation of the action to the audience. Audience members 'read' a moment according to what they know so far about the character, and they constantly re-assess their reading of that character in light of the information that these small details provide; so any exercise which creates readable details serves a Brechtian purpose.

Besides, as Brecht collaborator Manfred Wekwerth states: "There is *no* technique that *cannot* be used in the Brecht-theatre, so long as it serves to expose the contradictions in processes in such a way that they can be pleurably recognized by the spectator and lead to his own transformation" [Cited in Rouse 2002: 238]. The key phrase is 'pleurably *recognised*' – *Gestus* is a means of shaping the audience's perception. As Thomson explains, "...[t]he object, when it comes to production, is to present a narrative with such clarity that the audience can read, not only the behaviour of the characters, but also the provenance of that behaviour and its application to their own lives." [Thomson 2000: 110]. Indeed, "[i]t was Brecht's contention that *Gestus*, when properly applied, would enable an audience to understand both the story of the play and its implications even if it were separated from the actors by a soundproof glass wall." [Thomson 2000: 110]

In *Mutter Furie*, the story was told predominantly through the physical actions – there was so little spoken text, that we had our 'soundproof glass wall' in effect. The spectators had to observe the minute details of the physical actions in order to 'read' the relationships. Thus in our production every glance was carefully choreographed. The physical action was crafted to show the increasing intimacy between mother and soldier as the play progresses. The repeated actions of sleeping were a key element to showing this shift in the relationship throughout the play: initially mother and soldier always sleep on their chairs. Later, the mother sleeps on the floor and on the soldier's rug, demonstrating a certain trust and an attitude that 'what's yours is mine'. The only time that the soldier lies on the floor, in the final scene where he is burnt alive, these trust and intimacy are betrayed.

Developing *Gestus* through these physical improvisations meant that approximately three quarters of our production of *Mutter Furie* largely followed the structure and stage directions (though with greater detail) of our 'model', Travelling Light's original script. However, it then took its own direction. A turning point in this shift was scene 12, "Playing Games". This is a key moment of building trust between the two characters, as it is the first time they seem to enjoy each other's company. The process begins in the prior scene where the soldier shares half his apple with the mother, which becomes a game of who will be the last to be able to chop the increasingly smaller apple piece in half to give half to the other person. This develops into a further game the two play: in the original script this was a game about scrubbing the table – an action the mother repeats throughout the show. The first time we see her scrubbing is after the second scene, "the Fight", where for a moment, the soldier is tempted to rape her on the table – there her scrubbing is an attempt by her to erase that incident. While it made sense for the scrubbing to be transformed into a game, to show that the incident is forgiven and can now be laughed about, the action didn't develop clearly from the apple game for us. So we chose a different example of black humour: and related the game to other threats of violence ever-present in the room – the mother's vegetable knife and the soldier's gun. So we invented a "murder/suicide game" where after spinning the knife on the table, the mother pretends to stab herself in the stomach with it. We improvised the mother and soldier taking turns to enact means of killing themselves or each other in a cartoonish fashion. I gave the actors the rule that when it is their turn, they have to build on each other by increasing the scale and grotesqueness of the action by at least 10%. I got the actors to keep playing until they were exhausted, while I noted the best offers, which we later choreographed into the precise actions of the scene. My favourite means of death was when Rumphorst spontaneously ripped off his army boot and killed himself by sniffing it! Not only was this humorous but it related to the political situation: as a soldier he has been wearing these same boots and socks for weeks on end without an opportunity to wash. [While we see the mother washing onstage in other scenes, the soldier is never seen to use 'her' wash things.] It also led neatly into the next part of the scene, as it solved the problem of finding a reason for him to take his boot off so the mother sees the hole in his sock. Her offer to mend the sock is the second phase in the building of trust between them (and is described further below).

Other moments where we diverged from the 'model' were scene 15, "Waltzing", where the two dance with each other. In scene 14, "Accordion", instead of buying food, the soldier has used his limited funds to buy a piano-accordion in town, as this instrument is the nearest approximation he can find to being able to play piano again. In her anger at such a wasteful purchase, the mother insists he plays it for her and he is so woeful that she laughs at him. In Travelling Light's production, he places the accordion on the table where it 'magically' plays itself and they sing, drink and dance together joyfully, with her dressing up with her shawl as a skirt and he wearing the waistcoat she had been sewing for her son. This joyfulness didn't sit right for us, so instead we had the soldier so offended and upset at her laughter that she offers him her son's waistcoat in order to make up for hurting his feelings. Realising the meaning of her giving him this particular present, he sings for her. She hums and then takes his hands and they slowly and mournfully dance together. The song we chose for this moment was "Auld Lang Syne" as the melody is known in both English and German. In the English-speaking world this song is traditionally sung on New Year's Eve to remember those who have passed away in the prior year; the German text "Nehmt Abschied Brüder" ["Say farewell brothers"], is widely recognised, since it became a farewell song to close events of the scout organisation – and the German version is perhaps even more mournful than the English one!

Thus in our version, the dance represented them taking comfort in each other as they mourn those they have lost in the war, and the relationship becomes more ambiguous than mother/son, in that it has an almost romantic note. This ambiguity is another distinction from the original which developed throughout our rehearsal process: in Travelling Light's script, the soldier is referred to as 'the boy', and was played by a young actor in their production. We referred to the character as 'the soldier' as Stephan Rumphorst, who played the role, has a boyishness about him but is very clearly a grown man. There was also less of an age gap between the actors in our casting. I liked the ambiguity in the relationship – does the soldier become a son replacement for the mother or a potential romantic partner (husband replacement)? Thus certain moments in the play, such as the 'spin the bottle' game on the table with the knife after eating the apple together, contain a hint of flirtation. The murder/suicide game mentioned above emerges as the mother mimes knifing herself in the belly in order to break the potentially sexual tension.

Another departure from the 'model' was that we also added an additional final moment to the production, already hinted at in the letter the mother receives. The letter is written by a fellow soldier who intends to

return the son's watch to his mother at the end of the war. So we chose to have our onstage musician [Heiko Salmon] wear a soldier's cap throughout, and end the performance by entering the 'house' and placing the watch in the dead mother's hand.

Acting Style: a Brechtian Approach to Emotion

In his article 'Brecht and the Contradictory Actor', John Rouse discusses Brecht's concept of "the actor standing beside the role in performance, at once demonstrating and commenting on the character's behaviour" [Rouse 2002: 235]. Québécois director Robert Lepage also highlights this *gestic* nature of the actor's task when he points out that the German word for 'actor' – *Schauspieler* – literally means "one who *shows his playing*" [Charest 1997: 59 – my emphasis].

Because Brecht asks us to use our reason, both as practitioners creating the theatre work, and as spectators receiving it, it is often assumed that he doesn't permit any emotion in the production of plays. This is incorrect, with regard to his own work as well as 'Brechtian' production in general. Helene Weigel's acting had strong emotional impact on her audiences. As Martin and Bial explain: "For Brecht, theatre was an occasion for rational thought, not emotional catharsis. But this does not mean that Brecht's theatre was bloodless or without passion; his was not an intellectual theatre without feeling. Brecht's early productions were met with both riotous approval and disavowal: audiences booed, cheered, yelled at one another, and discussed the plays well beyond the performance. Brecht loved it. He was after participation and engagement – in and about a new world order. He wanted his theatre to be politically engaged, economically viable, and aesthetically 'entertaining'" [Martin and Bial 2000: 2].

Thus Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* does not mean we have no emotional response to the action, but rather that our emotional response is *controlled*: cutting off a scene before emotional catharsis, and beginning another which is causally unrelated⁴, builds a sense of frustration in the spectators; a frustration which Brecht hopes can be channeled towards changing the world that produces the situations depicted. Having a good cry at fictional tragic events releases this necessary frustration and we lose the compulsion to act, which is why Brecht abhorred catharsis.

⁴ NB: Some scenes in *Mutter Furie* are causally related; though some are separated by 'passing time', indicated by music in our production.

The misconception about emotion probably stems from the common translation of *Verfremdungseffekt* into English as ‘alienation’ effect – which implies a disconnected, unemotional response. Yet if you are never connected to something you can’t distance yourself from it, you are merely uninterested. Therefore good Brechtian theatre manipulates the connection to spectators’ emotions: they are not overwhelmed by a cathartic release of emotion yet neither are they totally disconnected. Audience empathy is utilised for theatrical and political effect. For example, curiosity is controlled. The scene titles in a Brechtian play, or beginning with the ending as in *Mutter Furie*, remove the suspense about *what* is going to happen, in order to make us look more closely at *how* and *why* it happens. We are still interested, but in a different way. Just as Brecht wants his theatre to be instructive *and* entertaining, Brechtian actors may play with emotion *and* intelligence. Brecht doesn’t require his actors to *feel* the character’s emotions, as a Stanislavskyan actor might, but rather to develop the skill to control the emotion of the spectators. Indeed as the contemporary director Robert Lepage states: “An actor must find the energy that will produce an emotion in his audience, not feel it himself. This is what is poorly understood in the principle of alienation in Brecht’s work” [Charest 1997: 155]⁵.

Similarly, the American director Robert Wilson “...has spoken increasingly about the relative values of *hot* and *cold* in the theatre. As an example, he describes [Heiner Müller’s] texts as ‘very hot emotionally’ and says that he prefers to present them in a cool objective manner, with... distance and formality... Wilson believes that this seemingly contradictory mode of presentation enhances rather than diminishes their impact: ‘When you’ve got a hot text and you want it to be really hot, you have to be very cold. If you perform it in a hot way, what you’re going to get is ...nothing.’” [Shyer 1989: 131].

Mutter Furie is quite a ‘hot’ text, as the events depicted are highly emotional. Thus I felt it was essential to go for a (Brechtian) restrained acting style emotionally. I wanted the audience to read the emotion onto the actors rather than show it too much, using the rule of thumb articulated by Zeami, the founder of Noh drama: “When you feel ten in your heart, express seven” [cited in Bogart 2001: 68]. So at key moments, such as when the mother receives the letter stating her son had been killed, I insisted on it being played unemotionally: the actress playing the mother [Plewa-Brodam] doesn’t need to *act* anything as the text tells the story for her. Besides, this presents

⁵ Lepage trained with Swiss director Alain Knapp, who learned from Brecht collaborators, after he graduated from acting school in 1978. Knapp’s approach to emotion provided a turning point in Lepage’s theatre work.

the mother as strong and stoic, which seemed appropriate for her situation: a survivor despite her men having died or left, and in effect a hostage in her own home. In fact, if she had played any emotion it would have been too much – what is often referred to as ‘double percussion’ [when you simultaneously do/demonstrate what you are telling us]. This ‘doubling’ of the information presented can tend towards empty melodrama, and in my opinion, also assumes a lack of intelligence in the audience, as it tells them too bluntly what to think and feel. It actively engages the spectators more when they have to search for a hint of emotion, and ‘read’ a subtle canvas for themselves.



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Thus the director's role is to help the actor's calibrate their performance: not too much, not too little emotion, and so they get a feel for timing. A crucial point where this became obvious in *Mutter Furie* was the sexual ambiguity in the spinning the knife game. The first time Plewa-Brodam played this, there was a slight hint of flirtation. When I pointed out that I found this theatrically effective, she played it more consciously and the moment lost its effectiveness. So I guided her back to the very subtle *hint* of flirtation, as this gave the audience more work to do – to decode this subtle shift in the relationship. If it is too explicit and easily seen, it activates the spectators less. Thus the work on *Gestus* is to set a clear (though not necessarily unambiguous) form, which ‘reads’ as emotion, so that *playing* emotions is unnecessary. The actor's aim, as Lepage argued above, is to create the curiosity and emotion *in the audience*, not in themselves.

Yet as above, this is not to say that the actors may not fill the form imaginatively or emotionally – as long as they remain within the parameters of form carefully set with the director for audience impact. This relates back to a more Brechtian tradition of direction, as opposed to a Stanislavskyan one: as with the more pictorial directors who have influenced my work, such as Bogart and Wilson, I set the form but leave the actors the freedom to emotionally fill it however they like. This is in contrast to some Stanislavsky-oriented directors, such as the British director Mike Alfreds, who does the opposite: Alfreds sets the emotions of the characters, but leaves the form [blocking] completely open. Setting the form ensures the crucial ‘readability’ which remains consistent from performance to performance.

Two key means I consciously used to ensure that the audience was activated and closely-observing these restrained performances, were conspicuous slowness and silence. Firstly, the choice to do the piece very slowly was logical within the fictional world of the play, in that it takes a long time to build trust in someone who has been your enemy for years, the slowness allows the characters to find their way into the new situation. I also wanted to show that the action takes place over an extended period of time, and thus the actions need to build on each other, being repeated and gradually altered to give a sense of this. Brecht has also suggested that to make a performance ‘readable’ an actor must be able “to space his gestures the way a typesetter spaces type”.

Thus we explored every action and every moment in depth. For example, in Travelling Light’s script, scene 12, “Playing games”, contains the following stage direction: “*there is a hole in his sock. She goes to him, he gives her his sock and she takes it to her chair and begins to darn it*” [Naylor & Travelling Light 2006: 10]. We took several minutes to do this moment, as follows: “*She sees the hole in his sock and continues laughing. The SOLDIER sits and tries to simply put his boot on again, but she prevents him from doing so by getting the needle and cotton out of the drawer and pointedly placing it on the table. The SOLDIER takes the cotton, removes the needle from it and attempts to thread the needle. The MOTHER watches over his right shoulder to see how he is getting on, the SOLDIER turns away from her to avoid her seeing him fail. She then watches over his left shoulder, so he turns in the other direction. He attempts several more times, then gives up and in frustration hands her the needle and cotton. She threads the needle. Then she stretches out her hand for the sock. He is embarrassed and doesn’t want to give her the smelly sock. The MOTHER waits with her hand*

out until he gives her the sock. She takes the sock and her chair to the other end of the table, sits and darns the sock". In drawing out the moment we developed the relationship and emphasised the mother/son dynamic, which leads to greater pathos later when she kills him.

Jude Merrill, producer for Travelling Light, who saw a performance of *Mutter Furie* in Berlin, commented after seeing our show that she had the feeling they had played it too fast. In their original production, the soldier simply hands over the sock and Merrill now wondered whether their version was too rushed. The original production was approximately 60 minutes long, ours almost 90 minutes. However, the key difference here is the audience: we made our production for adults. Travelling Light made their version for teenagers and this affected several production choices: they had more movement, more music, and it was more stylized, because they had to keep the interest of a younger audience. By comparison we were slow and more realistic in the way we played the actions. Travelling Light's version was surely correct for *their* target audience, as a teenage work experience student attached to Studiobühne Essen while we were rehearsing clearly found *Mutter Furie* too boring! Our audience was older, so we could push them further in their experience.

The slowness also served another purpose in our production: I wanted to explore this as a means of building the productive frustration Brecht favoured, by pushing the boundaries of audience patience. For over an hour of the performance not much seems to happen, plot-wise, and reaches a point where it is almost unbearable for the audience; but then everything happens at once. I consciously used the rapid tempo of final plot development as a counterpoint to the 'slow-burn' action earlier. This was my means of avoiding release (catharsis): as it gave the laughter (e.g. the humorous suicide/murder enactment scene) an edge, and then the rapid conclusion comes as a shock.

The slowness was accentuated by the fact that the performance was also quite silent. Dramaturgically, this was because the characters had no common language to communicate, so this had to be done through gesture. But primarily, the reduced spoken text, and indeed lack of most other sound, forces the spectators to observe differently. They notice every movement of actors because it is so silent. But it also brings actors and audience together in their discomfort. The characters experience discomfort – brought on by the social situation they find themselves in. But the audience shares this discomfort. They become hyper-aware of themselves, as every cough, shift

in their chair or other sound they make is very audible to each other – they are sitting in a room with strangers, in silence. This is particularly heightened in the Studiobühne Essen’s own theatre space as it is a small, black-box chamber theatre, with a maximum of 50 spectators per show. There is little distance between the audience and actors. The close proximity allows minute observation of the performers, but also the discomfort in the audience mirrors the discomfort in the characters, creating empathy for them. This silence and audience hyper-awareness of themselves was also somewhat frustrating for the actors: for the slower, first hour or so of the play, they received little response from audience⁶.

The silence was emphasized in another deviation from Travelling Light’s script in our production: the considerably reduced use of music. Travelling Light’s original production was through-composed. When I sought a dramaturgical logic for this, I struggled to find one – not surprisingly, as perhaps the reason was practical: they were making the piece for a youth audience, who needed music and movement to keep them engaged. While in both productions, there was a musician physically onstage throughout, in *Mutter Furie*, I applied a dramaturgical reasoning for use of music: it was not to underscore mood, but to show the passing of time; in particular when sleeping, going to the village, waiting for the other’s return. There were two exceptions to this rule: which represented a shift in the core attitudes of the characters. In an early scene, music accompanied the fight, highlighting the initial position of conflict between mother and soldier. Lighter music accompanied a humorous apple-sharing routine: as this marks the beginning of the shift to sympathy for the enemy. Sharp chords on the accordion were used at beginning and end to mark the gunshots of the firing squad – the return to an extreme conflict position.

⁶ The actors’s isolation and lack of audience response was emphasized even more for the performance in the Kulturhaus Spandau in Berlin, where the audience was at a much greater distance from the performers and therefore less audible. The spectators either looked down on the action from a balcony; or looked up at the action from the dress circle (from the distance of an orchestra pit away). From a dramaturgical point of view, I think the shared space was much more effective, from a Brechtian perspective of wanting the audience to assess “the provenance of that behaviour and its application to their own lives.” By being physically present in the same space as the actors, an audience member feels more actively involved. The physical distance in Berlin permitted a mental distance: a “this isn’t directly relevant to me”, as we were either in a god-like position watching from the balcony, or a helpless position looking up at the action like children.

Brechtian Approach to Objects

In addition to the spare aural space of the play, I also employed a spare Brechtian visual aesthetic. The house itself was marked out merely by a floorplan in white chalk on the black stage floor – along with the chalk-lines marking the locations of the corpses [like at crime scenes] as required by the script. The only scenic objects were a table and two chairs; and props such as the soldier's bedroll, the mother's washbasin and jug, and smaller items required by the action such as a knife, an apple, a carrot. The actions were 'realistic' and therefore required real objects for the action to function, although the environment was not realistically recreated. This is in line with Brecht's philosophy: he didn't want actors to 'pretend' to do actions, but to actually *do* them in the matter-of-fact manner of someone who has done them every day of their life. In our case, the sparse scenography, with few props being responsible for creating the visual 'world', was not required from a dramaturgical point of view – often necessary in the Epic theatre, due to the large number of locations to be represented – as the action in *Mutter Furie* entirely takes place in the house. Thus any action outside the house, such as going to the village to shop; or catching a rabbit in the forest, was simply assumed by actors leaving the front door, walking down a 'path' at the edge of the stage and freezing until the action required their re-entry to the house, bringing additional props with them. In our case, the scenographic sparseness served to intensify the focus on the actor's actions.

The wild rabbit prop was particularly important, as it operates on a number of levels in the action – therefore we had to obtain a real, taxidermied wild rabbit. Firstly, the rabbit represents the soldier's attempt to feed the woman: food shortages are a thematic in the piece, as they have to share a carrot and an apple, the only available foodstuffs, when they are both starving; thus an entire rabbit is, comparatively, a feast. We had a real carrot and a real apple as they had to be eaten onstage; so for it to be 'readable' we needed to apply the convention to the rabbit and have a real rabbit as well.

However, a real rabbit was also essential because the rabbit serves as a crucial metaphor. In scene 16, "The letter", the mother hears from his comrade in the regiment that her son was "killed by enemy gunfire...it just about cut him in two." [Naylor & Travelling Light 2006: 13] In scene 17, "Rabbit", the mother begins to instruct the soldier in how to skin a rabbit to remove the fur for cooking. However, when she says he needs to cut the rabbit "right down the middle" [Naylor & Travelling Light 2006: 14] she begins to see her son covered in blood in place of the rabbit. It was crucial that it was a real rabbit (which is supposedly freshly killed), as the mother must feel disgust at an action she would have done regularly as a farming woman. She refuses

to let the rabbit be skinned and, holding the rabbit like a child, she spends a night sitting with it. At the end of this sequence she has made the decision to kill the soldier. Some audience members asked why we kept the text of the letter in the show – as the action of the mother, slumping as she read the news of his death, made the news the letter contained so clear that they didn't need the letter to be read out loud. I chose to keep the letter text in, simply to clarify the metaphor of the rabbit standing for her son. The rabbit prop also highlighted the ambiguity about the relationship mentioned earlier. In scene 10, "Dead Husband", the woman explains that her husband had been a poacher, so in bringing a rabbit home the soldier also fills the husband's role.

Departure from Brecht: Exchanging Historisierung [Historicisation] for 'Timelessness'

One Brechtian concept that we eventually chose not to use in this production was *Historisierung* ('Historicisation'), a concept which illustrates Brecht's "focus on cycles of historical development and change... to re-evaluate and re-interpret past narratives as a method for gaining greater understanding of existing social conditions, and how to change them." [Martin & Bial 2000: 8]. *Historisierung* is often utilised to further assist the audience's assessment of character's choices; and means setting plays in the past or in exotic, unfamiliar locations to allow objective analysis of social issues that affect the current audience. The theory is that an exotic setting permits spectators to look at the bigger questions relevant to them in general terms, rather than getting bogged down in assessing how accurately the stage world reflects their own. By making the setting unfamiliar, Brecht frees the audience to examine these questions in a more objective manner. This was largely a dramaturgical strategy in Brecht's writing, but with certain texts directors also have the choice as to how specifically identifiable they want the setting to be. With *Mother Savage*, Travelling Light was using de Maupassant's story about the Franco-Prussian war, as a basis for a piece commenting on the 1991 – 2001 war in the former Yugoslavia: *Mother Savage* premiered in 2006, that is, before the declaration of independence for Kosovo in 2008.

My initial concept for *Mutter Furie* was to set it in *Stunde Null* ["zero hour" – immediate post-World War 2] Germany, an idea which could have made use of *Historisierung*. This was to create a point of difference from the original production and to acknowledge the company's location in Germany. This proposal was categorically rejected by the company. Because Rumphorst's English is American-accented, it would be logical that he play a US soldier. Admittedly, the dramaturgy of the play – based around food shortages for

the occupying army as well as the locals – wouldn't be entirely plausible as historically the American soldiers were extremely well-supplied. But the protests were more about how that particular moment in German history was to be portrayed: firstly, as the German-speaker, it would be implied by the action of killing the soldier that the mother was a Nazi sympathiser, and Plewa-Brodam was not comfortable with this interpretation. Interestingly, the company also wouldn't accept that an American could do anything bad (such as the initial near-rape scene). The Germans in the West had welcomed the Americans as *Befreier* [saviours; freeing them both from Nazi rule, and from the risk of Russian occupation] so they felt the mother's initial mistrust just wouldn't work. I was surprised at the vehemence of this protest – and pointed out that no army or nation or race in general is *all* good. Indeed the 1977 film *Stunde Null* made in the former East Germany (Soviet-controlled zone) shows American soldiers as untrustworthy. Though this film obviously made the Americans the bad guys for ideological reasons, it seemed that this argument wasn't acceptable in Essen at all.

So we decided to set the production in a non-specific time and place. Yet achieving 'timeless-ness' is in itself extremely difficult on the stage. Every object suggests a period or a place, especially a uniform and weapon: which were essential to show that the man was a soldier. A gun is a key element in the story, as its possession is what gives the soldier his initial power over the woman. We used a reasonably contemporary pistol, which implied at least early 20th century as a time period. The mother's costume could be relatively neutral – we aimed to have it look like she was wearing some of her husband's old clothes [trousers and belt] as a means to reduce the risk of potential rape by seeming less feminine. Yet the soldier's uniform was more difficult. We chose to have him wear khaki-coloured trousers and shirt, which implies more Allies than Germans (except in North Africa) and we used a grey military coat; actually it was a genuine World War 2 Russian overcoat. We removed the insignia and buttons in an attempt to make it more neutral but the cut of it was still recognizable to some audience members. So we attempted to make it 'timeless' by using elements from *different* armies so that it was not easily identifiable as belonging to a particular *one*.

In the end, I think the attempt at 'timeless-ness' better served the play. The non-specificity meant that the audience did not feel they were obliged to choose one side over another because of historical knowledge external to the stage world. However, some theatre colleagues whose work I admire, and therefore whose opinions carry great weight with me, stated that they are sick of "non-specific plays about war". The lack of specificity

allows the spectators to let themselves off the hook. This was borne out by some audience comments about the production: several audience members argued that “a mother wouldn’t do that” [i.e. kill someone to avenge her son] and disagreed with the ending because of her [and their] empathy with the soldier. One couple, who saw the production in Berlin, went so far as to say that such a violent ending is not necessary as “we’ve solved that” – implying that war is not something Germany will ever have to deal with again, which sounds a bit naive!

Is a Brechtian Approach Still Effective?

The avid discussion and strong opinions that resulted from the production suggest that it was successful in making the audience think, and thus succeeded in Brechtian terms. The strong choices I made – in using silence, slowness, and scenographic sparseness so the focus is very clearly on the physical actions – also appear to have been well-received. Firstly, this was evidenced by the fact that the production was in demand: it remained in repertoire at the Studiobühne Essen for two and a half years. *Mutter Furie* has toured to the Kulturhaus Spandau in Berlin in April 2012; to the Internationale Theatertage Hanau theatre festival in October 2014; and has been invited to Nizhny Novgorod in Russia as part of a cultural exchange in May 2015.

As to my own goals, in testing an explicitly Brechtian approach: we did take a clear ‘model’ and yet made it our own, by examining the problems and finding our own solutions. The focus on *Gestus* proved to be successful means of ‘readable’ story-telling, as evidenced by several audience members saying they really didn’t need the spoken text. An extremely positive review in the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* stated that “One constantly catches oneself minutely watching the protagonists in order to read and interpret their actions, their silences, their glances. Because it is almost entirely through these that they communicate the events and their relationship to each other” [Strahl 2012]. The success of the Studiobühne Essen production has also encouraged several other companies to produce the play since.

The title of this article refers to ‘selective Brechtianism’ in that I took what I could use and left the rest. Interestingly, I found that many of the Brechtian concepts were still functional. It seems that a sparse Brechtian aesthetic is still relevant and effective, but in our case the concept of *Historisierung* was less appropriate. Yet this is as we would expect more than 50 years after Brecht’s death – any methodology has to evolve to remain relevant. German playwright and director Heiner Müller, whom many suggested was Brecht’s theatrical heir, has often implied that not to question Brecht is to betray him.

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