



# “Cultivating the Art of Living”: The Pleasures of Bertolt Brecht’s Philosophising Theatre Pedagogy

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In this article, I explore Bertolt Brecht’s philosophy of education with particular reference to his notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) as brought to life in the art of gestic acting (*Gestus*). Giving examples from the 1960 *Mother Courage* DEFA film version of the play, I demonstrate how Brecht’s philosophising theatre is brought forth in Helene Weigel’s gestic acting when portraying the play’s controversial protagonist. The actor’s conduct of careful observation and imitation of contradictory human behaviour, are shown to be akin to the practical philosophising stance that Brecht wishes to hone in his theatre audiences. Here, Brecht shares a common focus with Aristotle: for both, mimesis is the plausible imitation of human action, and pleasure is mimesis’ ultimate aim. But Brecht and Aristotle also differ as to their understanding of what constitutes the plausibility of an imitation; and why and how pleasure is to occur in the audience. Through the practice of a joyfully estranged mimesis, Brecht invites his actors and audiences to philosophise: as to what kind of actions and what kind of theory/theorising (and vice versa) might nourish, or stifle, or human capacity to live a flourishing life together, in the human theatre. In other words, his philosophical theatre, through the art of *Gestus* in particular, becomes a pedagogical space that seeks to cultivate *the art of living* in us.

## Why Bother with Brecht’s Philosophising Theatre?

German theatre maker Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is arguably one of the most influential playwrights and theatre theorists of the 20th Century. This should however not be simply equated with some canonical status of a great man who has produced great dramatic classics. Jameson (1998) suggests that Brecht would have been rather uncomfortable with an argument that seeks to prove his cult status or canonicity, or his as yet unrecognised value for posterity. Instead, Jameson thinks (and so do I), that Brecht would have been delighted

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in an argument that focuses on his ‘usefulness’ in the here and now (p. 1). In fact, Brecht might be best described as a practical philosopher:

‘Brecht was an astute and articulate participant in his own era, seeking both to understand shape it in his writing and thought. For him ratiocination itself – the process of thinking and, via thought, coming to terms with the complexity of the world – was deeply pleasurable. Even greater pleasure occurred when thinking produced not just understanding but also the potential for positive, intentional change’ (Brockmann 2021, p. i).

In this article, I will argue that it is Brecht’s pedagogical intention to bring forth an equally joyful philosophising stance in his theatre actors and audiences. I will draw on a selection of Brecht’s theoretical writings and use examples from his (filmed) play *Mother Courage* to illustrate his ideas in practice. But what do I exactly refer to when I use the term theatre ‘pedagogy’? In German usage, Pädagogik (pedagogy) refers to *both* theory and practice. Rooted in the enlightenment as well as Christian (mystic) tradition of Bildung, Pädagogik is concerned with the (philosophical) questions of human flourishing and (self-)cultivation (Gadamer 2001; Hotam 2019). At the same time, this includes (the more practical) question as to how interactions between self and world are to be structured, in order to bring forth certain educational ideals. As a result, Pädagogik comprises the historical study of educational philosophies’/ideals’ contextual emergence; as well as the hermeneutic-phenomenological study of the structures of pedagogical interaction/practice (Zirfas and Klepacki 2013; Friesen et al. 2012).

For the purpose of this article, I will use the term ‘pedagogy’/‘pedagogical’ and ‘education’/‘educational’ in this Bildung-inflected double sense. Brecht’s ‘pedagogy’ then refers both to Brecht’s theory/philosophy of theatre education (his ideals), as well as his resulting aesthetic practice. But before we dive into Brecht’s approach to theatre pedagogy, let us first establish the context of the time(s) he lived in. Brecht emerged from the ‘most tumultuous period of modern European history’ (Brockmann 2021, p. i). He lived through imperial Germany, two World Wars and 10 years of self-imposed exile from Nazi Germany in Scandinavia and the US, where he wrote most of his plays and theatre theory. Returning to a post-WWII politically divided Germany in 1948, he was given his own theatre (the Berliner Ensemble) in the new, communist German Democratic Republic’s (East) Berlin capital. Here, he lived (not without artistic and political tensions with the communist government) until his death in 1956. Brecht’s art, as well as his theoretical essays, reveal the breadth and diversity of his artistic and intellectual influences. They ranged from Friedrich Nietzsche (Grimm 1979), to ancient Chinese philosophy (Wessendorf 2016), (dissident) Marxist Korsch (2012) and the Munich cabaret scene (Mumford 2009) – just to name a few.

Why should the SPED reader bother to engage with Brecht’s philosophising theatre? We live in our own (post-pandemic) times of great upheaval, facing ever rising inflation, hardening political viewpoints and mental health crisis (Giroux 2021; Williams 2022). In light of these *real* issues, is my emphasis on pleasure, theatre and philosophy not rather self-indulgent? Would I not be better served by concentrating on Brecht’s political theatre, when it is committed to *instructing* people into concrete, progressive thought and actions for the creation of a better, fairer world (e.g. Otty 1995)? Brecht indeed produced politically instructive plays, e.g. *the Mother* (1994) and *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* (2016). These

carried concrete political messages to strategically combat 1930's fascism and popularise communist theories and strategies (Bradley 2021). Beyond these more obvious politically strategic messages however, Brecht considered theatre's aesthetic production and reception processes to be – in themselves – pedagogical. Theatrical methods were pedagogical and political for Brecht, because they intentionally structure the relationship between self and world – on the basis of certain ideals (even if these are not always openly admitted). At the same time, Brecht was suspicious of *any* pre-mediated, closed, and top-down theorising (even a 'progressive' one; e.g. Marxism), including (at times) his own. As I will show, he questioned instructions and 'messages', when these were disconnected from a method that considered people's own ability to examine and question the usefulness of (any proposed) ideas or practices for their (own flourishing) everyday lives (e.g. Brecht and Tatlow 2016).

## Beware the Joy of Experimentation

Brecht's focus on 'method' over 'doctrine' (Jameson 1998) is however not to be equated with a naïve belief in methodology, and the objectivity that can be attained through it (Gadamer 2013). Brecht's penchant for aesthetic experimentation – and his (hope for a) method that (might) realise his educational ideals for a philosophising theatre - is not a clichéd version of an objective scientific method for the theatre. Brecht (1978) indeed referred to his theatre as 'scientific'. But for him, 'science and knowledge [in German *Wissenschaft*] are not grim and dreary duties, in which ideal and practice stand in a (predictable) causal relationship. Science and knowledge are not, as the philosopher Feyerabend (1975) aptly expressed it, ways of using scientific truths in a dynamic of dominating subjective individual experience 'by the more subtle and vicious power of truth', rather than physical coercion (p. 203). For Brecht, science and knowledge are first and foremost sources of pleasure to be enjoyed by the individual. And 'even the epistemological and theoretical dimensions of "science" [or the theatre of course] are to be thought in terms of *Popular Mechanics* and of the manual amusement of combining ingredients and learning to use new and unusual tools' (Jameson 1998, p. 2). Both theory/ideals and practice, in Brecht's view (Brecht and Tatlow 2016), are inter-related. They are there to be experimented with and joyfully 'tested' as to their 'usefulness' for a flourishing life. When I refer in the article to the 'practical moral-aesthetic' dimension of Brecht's approach to acting, I wish to draw attention to his methodological emphasis on the *unity* of theory and practice (Jameson 1998).

Having clarified my use of terms and my main argument, I will now explore the pedagogy of Brecht's joyfully philosophising theatre in four steps. I start the article by looking at the relationship between theory and practice in Brecht's actor training and stage performances. After giving an introductory example of Brecht's view on the theory-practice interaction in the training of actors, I move to describe key scenes from the 1960 *Mother Courage* DEFA (the GDR's film studio) film production. Here, I show how Brecht's theory of the estrangement effect comes to life, and is shaped by, Helene Weigel's acting in the (filmed) play. In a third step, I look more closely at what Brecht means when he describes his new acting/theatre aesthetics as 'non-Aristotelian'. Here, I firstly point towards Aristotle and Brecht's common focus. Both define mimesis as the plausible imitation of human action, and pleasure as mimesis' ultimate aim. At the same time, their views differ with regards to what is to exactly constitute the 'plausibility' of an imitation; and why and how 'pleasure' is to occur

in the audience. In my last and fourth step, I connect my argument back to the article's introduction. Here, I sum up the nature of Brecht's philosophical theatre. It is a pedagogical space that renders 'strange' taken-for-granted human social behaviours – with the aim to open up the nature of 'human being' (as a verb and noun) for joyful, philosophical inquiry.

## The Art of Acting as a Pedagogical Model for Brecht's Theatre

We can perhaps start this article with the assumption that, in his later years (the early 1950's), 'Brecht was only too aware of the [his] theory's lacunae', as John Willet (1978, p. 245) reminds us in an editorial note to Brecht's practice-focused publication *Theaterarbeit* (Berlau et al. 1952). Brecht recognised [Willet suggests as a sign of his apparent mellowing in later years] that he himself had fallen into the trap of the scholar, who had taken for granted theatre's (and especially acting's) practical, experimental dimension. Willet (the first one to translate Brecht into English in 1964) draws our attention to an unsigned fragment that follows the introduction to *Theaterarbeit*. Here, Brecht places acting's practical-moral, experimental dimension, over any finite theorisations about its purpose, at the heart of the theatrical craft.

'In the theatre people 'act'. One can expect any account of this acting to be reasonably serious, as it matters to society. It should not, however be thought that it is being treated flippantly if the account and the accompanying technical explanations are not immediately crammed with big words. If this acting is to be artistic it must involve seriousness, fire, jollity, love of truth, inquisitiveness, sense of responsibility. But does one hear real scholars talking about love of truth or real revolutionaries about feelings for justice. They take that sort of thing for granted.' (Brecht 1978, p. 246).

Theoretical propositions that claim an all-encompassing explanatory power about the nature of the art of acting, Brecht realised, can lose sight of the fact that, as a practice, it is ultimately bound up in the actor's self-guided commitment to hone her craft. In other words, the actor's art is dependent on the development of a personal, practical, moral-aesthetic disposition to guide her work; one that is open to (joyful) experimentation with the meaning of theory *for* her practice. This of course includes an inquiring stance into how 'big words' like 'love of truth' and 'sense of responsibility' might manifest in her training. The actor's conduct towards her craft, and the art of acting more generally, serves as a key pedagogical model for the practical, joyful philosophising stance that Brecht's wishes to hone in his theatre audiences. In the following section, I will give an example of a typical Brecht production to illustrate how Brecht's key aesthetic strategy – the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) - was brought to live in his theatrical methods, and through the art of (Helene Weigel's) 'gestic acting' in particular. The DEFA film version of the play *Mother Courage* (Wekwerth and Palitzsch 1960) was closely modeled on Brecht's stage production, e.g. as documented in Brecht's *Theaterarbeit* (Berlau et al. 1952) and retains most of its methods of estrangement.

## Mother Courage and her Children: A Lesson in *Verfremdung*

*Mother Courage and her Children* was written in Scandinavian exile as a furious reaction to the 1939 Nazi occupation of Poland. The play was written to dissuade the Swedish government of any plans to boost their unstable economy through militarisation (the way Hitler had attempted). *Mother Courage* is a parable about the devastating effects of war on our humanity, and the blindness of anybody hoping to profit from war. In order to be able to reflect on contemporary issues 'afresh', the play's plot is historicised (a common estrangement feature of Brecht's plays). Set in the Thirty Year War 1618–1648, fought over religious and political allegiances, the story follows the (mis)fortunes of Anna Fierling known as Mother Courage. A feisty canteen woman with a skilful sense to detect business opportunities in the most unlikely of situations, she is determined to feed herself and her children, and make a good living, by selling provisions to soldiers on the battlefields of Europe.

The play/film starts with the announcement of Scene 1's key plot points:

'Spring, 1624. In Dalarna, the Swedish Commander Oxenstierna is recruiting for the campaign in Poland. The canteen woman Anna Fierling, commonly known as Mother Courage, loses a son' (Brecht 1966, p. 23).

The original stage production used written placards/projected subtitles to announce the plot to the audience in advance. The film production (Wekwerth and Palitzsch 1960) superimposes the artist Jacques Callot's copper etchings to divide individual scenes, with the scene's upcoming events announced in narration only. The opening narration gives away that our protagonist will lose a son in this scene. This estrangement technique undermines the play's direct, immersive dramatic elements by revealing key plot points. The audience is to pay attention to – and philosophise about – the *process* of the (known) events' *emergence* – rather than fully immerse themselves in their (seemingly spontaneous) dramatic unfolding. When Courage enters the stage, the audience encounters a woman who does not show any signs of a soon-to-be grieving mother. Courage is instead parading around on her (covered) cart, which is pulled, not by two horses or oxen, but by her two grown sons Eilif and Swiss Cheese/Schweizer Kaas. She is singing loudly and proudly, announcing herself – to whoever is not too dead – to enter into business with her:

'**She sings:** Stop all the troops: here's Mother Courage! Hey, Captain, let them come and buy! For they can get from Mother Courage Boots they will march in till they die! (...) Christians, awake! Winter, is gone! The snows depart! Dead men sleep on! Let all of you who still survive Get out of bed and look alive!' (p. 24–25).

This estranged staging of contradictions – Courage's display of confidence; her two sons who enter the stage like draught animals (pulling the cart); combined with the audience's knowledge that she will soon lose one of them – is to instigate an act of inquiry. How do human actions, and their accompanying values, come to pass in particular circumstances? How will Courage 'lose' a son when she presents herself as seemingly invincible? Courage holds herself like a veteran war hero. She is an old hand at traversing – even flourishing – in the theatres of war. She is able to keep her children safe, her purse full of coins and the cart stocked with provisions. Anna Fierling, so it seems, can turn any dangerous moment, and

politically intractable situation, into a business opportunity (her entrance song even implies a certain confidence that she can raise the dead for trade). Her reputation as a shrewd business woman precedes her (as we will see shortly). By staging this curiously controversial tradeswoman, Brecht asserts that there is joy to be had in trying to master the understanding of the often contradictory social reality of human actions that we encounter in the world. The estrangement effect is to create a pedagogical space, in which the audience can rehearse a stance of practical philosophising.

Another typical estrangement device that we find in Brecht's plays is the *episodic* rather than dramatic structuring of plot points. Each scene (e.g. *Scene One* and *Two* in *Mother Courage*) consists of a self-contained event, like a play in play. Although these episodes are part of a longer, structured story (spanning twelve scenes) as well, they do not sequentially lead the audience towards a dramatic denouement, e.g. in the form of an Aristotelian catharsis (I will explain the difference between Brecht and Aristotle in more detail later). In *Scene One's* 'episode', for example, Courage tells the (anti-)heroic origin story of her name. She was named *Courage* because, almost broke, she boldly (and 'madly', as she puts it herself) drove her wagon through open gunfire to sell fifty loafs of bread during the occupation of Riga. 'They were going mouldy, what else could I do?', she adds flippantly (Brecht 1966, p. 25). The familiar, narrative gesture of naming a hero - normally for a virtuous deed - is estranged through Courage's seeming disregard of her children's and her own safety, as well as her flippant, anti-heroic attitude. The self-imposed near death experience is strangely lauded as a heroic act, performed in service of the most insignificant of business deals - the sale of (almost) mouldy bread. Breaking the audience's dramatic immersion (by estranging the familiar narrative gesture of naming a hero for their virtuous deed) - the spectator is turned into an active observer and commentator on the protagonist's *emerging* actions and values. Why does Courage tell this story? Why does she act this way? Does she really believe in the 'courage' of her actions? What is 'courage'? Brecht's theatre of estrangement shows us that it produces a world (of ideas and practices) on stage. This world of human concepts and actions cannot however be simply consumed as a truthful representation. Its 'truth' (What is virtue? How does a hero act?) has to be figured out by an audience that is not to fear - but to enjoy - the process of making sense of the often contradictory human actions that make up the social reality one inhabits.

### **Gestus: Acting the 'Not ...But'**

Brecht described this way of showing contradictory human behaviour through the art of acting *Gestus*. *Gestus* describes the various ways that the actor (here: Helene Weigel) makes manifest the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) in her craft. This gestic acting aims to move the audience to consider the implied alternatives in a character's actions. They are to inquire into the formative processes that have shaped Courage's attitude (the circumstances, her decisions ...). And the spectator is to consider if she *could* have acted any differently - or not. *Gestus* is the actor's way of integrating the V-effekt - through the enactment of, what Brecht called, 'not...but' moments on stage:

'When s/he [the actor/actress] appears on stage, besides what s/he is actually doing, s/he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what s/he is not doing; that is to

say, s/he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that this acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants (...) whatever s/he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way, every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is 'fixing the "not ... but".' (Brecht 1978, p. 137).

This 'not ... but' moment comes to life in *Scene One*, when the audience cannot be sure if Courage's story (of her naming), told as a response to the sergeant's request for the family's identity papers, does not in fact serve a different purpose altogether. Delivered in (rehearsed-sounding) chorus by her two sons pulling her cart like two draught animals - this fantastical, (anti-)heroic story is (it seems) regularly re-told by the family. But why? Is this 'gestus' of telling such outlandish story perhaps not a sign of Courage's greed and negligence, but instead proof of her wit? Is this an example of her practical strategies for keeping her family safe in tough times? Is this Courage's way of undermining the military authorities, who humiliate her way of life so regularly? Is this anti-heroic story a way of ridiculing the army's own calls for 'heroes' - young men who will sacrifice themselves in the name of abstract virtues like honour and courage? Is she acting somewhat 'heroically' after all? Through Weigel's multi-layered storytelling, the audience is led to philosophise as to the formation of Courage's actions and attitude.

Her wild origin story seem to get her and her children regularly out of trouble with the authorities. And despite her love of business, Courage does not wish to see her kids embroiled in any of war's dirty dealings. Furious at the officer's sly efforts to recruit her two (only two willing) sons into the army, Courage creates another storytelling moment. She educates the military personnel *and* her children about the *dangers* of virtuous behaviour. Slipping into the role of a fortune teller - 'she can look into the future, everyone says so', her son Swiss Cheese affirms (p. 29) - she invites the (slightly dim) sergeant and her children to draw lots to determine their fate. She has secretly given all slips of paper black crosses and left none blank. Each faced with the fateful black cross, sergeant and children are forced to consider their (possibly) not-so-distant demise. They are conscious, for a moment at least, that war, although man-made, when unleashed, also plays a deadly game with its players; one that is ultimately also beyond their human control and will. Using this moment of existential confusion as an educational opportunity, Courage seeks to dissuade her children from getting involved with the military. Although the audience is told that all her three children have been brought up by her to embody specific virtues - Katrin is kind; Eilif is brave; and Swiss Cheese is honest - Courage urges them *not* to act on their virtues. Given the corrupted times they live in, she instructs them, their goodness will not only *not* be rewarded, but will (if they are not very careful) get them killed.

## Can One be Good in Corrupt Times?

Through the actor's (Weigel's) continuous narrative re-framing (estrangement) of what the concept and practice of virtue might mean for human action and flourishing/perishing, the audience is to reflect on their taken-for-granted ways of conceiving of 'the good'. Can one be 'good' in bad times? 'Individuals remain individual, but become a social phenomenon;

their passions and also their fates become a social concern. The individual's position in society loses its God-given quality and become the centre of attention' (Brecht 1978, p. 104). Mother Courage's passions – her love for her children; her shrewdness and greed for money and status; her excitement about the glamour of war; her righteous anger at the authority's empty talk of morality – become visible in all their complex, social entanglements: could she have acted differently (more virtuous even?) given the circumstances that have formed her attitude?

As predicted in what was only meant to be a 'lesson', Mother Courage's fortune-telling becomes reality. All her children's fates are sealed – even if their deaths are all strangely self-imposed. As foreseen, their demise is brought forth by their continually virtuous acts of bravery (Eilif), honesty (Swiss Cheese) and kindness (Katrin), but also by Courage's determination to keep the theatre of war going, so that business can continue. In *Scene One*, Courage is shown to be easily seduced by a business opportunity. Lost in haggling over the price of a belt for the sergeant, she does not even notice (despite her mute daughter Katrin's attempts to get her attention) that her brave son Eilif, despite her warnings, has been lured into joining the army. She has now indeed lost a son. And over the course of the play and her various business dealings, we see her lose *all* her three children to the very war that she hoped to make a profit from. Eilif is executed for repeating a cruel enemy attack in peace time, that brought him a decoration in war time. Honest Swiss Cheese is killed by the enemy army for not handing over the regiment's cash box (which he was entrusted with as their pay master). And kind Katrin sacrifices herself to alert the villagers to an unexpected army attack, in order to save the lives of their children. And to our recurring surprise, despite her losses, Courage condemns the battlefields just for a brief moment of anger and grief – only to curse the arrival of peace time, and the resulting loss of business, even more passionately. The actress Helene Weigel shows Courage contradictory behaviour. She is portrayed as being well aware of the unjustified (and often de-humanising) motivations that can underlie (a bad government's) calls for, and reliance on, ordinary people's virtues. But at the same time, Courage is shown as doing nothing to change, or even question, the very circumstances that make such mockery of the idea of virtue (even when she loses everything, including her beloved children).

Through the art of gestic acting, the actress (Helene Weigel) breaks the audience's full identification with the protagonist, and opens out for inquiry our everyday concepts and practices (here: as to what it means to be 'good'). Helene Weigel *shows* the character, quotes her lines (e.g. in spoken singing) and repeats familiar real life incidents (e.g. how people behave when they haggle and try to seal a deal; or protect/re-connect with a loved one). The gestus of 'quoting' her behaviour through cabaret-style *Sprechgesang* (spoken singing), is, for example, demonstrated in Mother Courage's musical accompaniment of Eilif's war hero song during *Scene Two's* 'Song of the Woman and the Soldier'. Here, Courage's 'brave' son Eilif has turned into a (rather cruel) war hero. It is the audience's first time of meeting him again after he has been recruited into the military in *Scene One* – against his mother's will and advice. *Scene Two* is set in the (Protestants') army camp. We encounter Mother Courage selling an overpriced 'special' chicken (capon) to the desperate, and equally shrewd, field captain's cook. He is forced (with no access to any ingredients) to put on a celebratory dinner in honour of a newly decorated war hero. It is here where Courage reveals to the cook her critical view on the soldier's supposed 'virtues'. Talk of virtues, she insists, is the government's (e.g. the king's) way to cover up their own (moral and strategic) incompetence



- in the name of heroism and loyalty. 'Whenever there are great virtues, it is a sure sign that something is wrong' (Brecht/Bentley 1966, p. 39), Courage tells us wisely:

**'Mother Courage:** (...) When a general or a king is stupid and leads his soldiers into a trap, they need this virtue of courage. When he's tight-fisted and hasn't enough soldiers, the few he does have need the heroism of Hercules — another virtue. And if he's slovenly and doesn't give a damn about anything, they have to be as wise as serpents or they're finished. Loyalty's another virtue and you need plenty of it if the king's always asking too much of you. All virtues which a well-regulated country with a good king or a good general wouldn't need. In a good country virtues wouldn't be necessary. Everybody could be quite ordinary, middling, and, for all I care, cowards' (p. 39).

Courage is sealing a deal with the cook, whilst spouting her wisdom. She sits down to pluck the sold chicken. And it is only then that she realises that the war hero, who is to be wined and dined, is actually her son Eilif (who she has not seen for two years). Listening at the field captain's tent, she overhears the story of her son's heroic deeds. He is decorated for having tricked and slaughtered a group of villagers, in order to gain access to their livestock, and feed the Protestant army's soldiers (he is later executed for a very similar deed when peace has momentarily broken out). Whilst awaiting his honorary meal (and promotion), Eilif celebrates - in song - the cold determination of the brave soldier. The song features a conversation between a group of soldiers and a woman (perhaps a concerned mother or girlfriend). Her warnings as to the soldiers' ill-fated and hubristic ventures are laughingly disregarded. Eilif espouses the virtues of the soldier's steely composure and untameable bravery (in typical spoken singing), whilst performing (an almost ballerina-like) 'marching dance' on the spot.

'But that young soldier, his knife at his side and his gun in his hand, he steps into the tide: For water never could hurt him! When the new moon is shining on yonder church tower we are all coming back: go and pray for that hour: That's what the soldiers told the wise woman.' (Brecht 1966, p. 39–40).

Mother Courage has listened at the tent all along. She starts to accompany Eilif in song, whilst forcefully hitting a large wooden barrel behind the tent with the long wooden spoon that she seems to carry around with her everywhere. Set in opposition to Eilif's marching rhythm, she creates an eerily dissonant (estranged) sound, that seems to reference the chaos and unpredictability of war. Wishing to unmask Eilif's false belief in the soldier's virtue, she invents a new stanza for his song:

**'Mother Courage:** Then the wise woman spoke: you will vanish like smoke, leaving nothing but cold air behind you! Just watch the smoke fly! Oh God, don't let him die! said the wise woman to the soldier.

Eilif What's that?

**Mother Courage** (singing on): And the lad who defied the wise woman's advice. When the new moon shone, floated down with the ice: He waded in the water and it drowned him. The wise woman spoke, and they vanished like smoke, And their glorious deeds did not warm us. Your glorious deeds do not warm us.' (p. 40).

The actors' songs – as an estrangement effect - serve as a 'third-person' comment on the events that have shaped the character's attitudes (Courage's disdain of any talk of virtues and heroes; Eilif's need for recognition of his bravery). The songs are to help the audience and actors to de-familiarise from a full identification with the protagonists and subvert a full immersion into the dramatic action. As audience (and actors), we are to be able to ascertain, and question, the characters formative influences (Why does Courage still partake in war's business although she is aware of the risk of losing her children? Why is Eilif so keen to prove himself?). And we are to consider the alternative influences and behaviours that *could* have emerged (given different decisions and/or different circumstances). Helene Weigel and Ekkehard Schall show us Mother Courage and Eilif's actions and attitudes in all their contradictions and tensions. As her song demonstrates, Mother Courage is only too aware that war can kill. She knows that even the most heroic war deeds are no protection against the loss of life – and the grief and adversity of those loved ones left behind with nothing 'to warm them' (neither their hearts nor their bodies). But her criticism seems to straight pass by Eilif. He is simply delighted to see his mother. He is proud that she overheard his brave acts and witnessed his promotion, even if she unexpectedly slaps him in the face in front of the field captain in return. Courage is angry that Eilif did not surrender to the villagers (who were armed with sticks and forks). At the same time, she is furious that he so easily succumbs to empty talk of bravery. But she is also happy to see her son, anxious at losing him to the war effort, which she of course kept going by using the opportunity to sell an overpriced chicken to the desperate army cook.

## Playing The Situation of War as an Experimental Situation

Weigel's handling of props (the chicken, the wooden spoon, the cart), her wit and defiant attitude when she calls out the stupidity of the authorities; her obvious love for her children; her grief at their loss; her greed (mixed with necessity) to sustain herself and her children; her pride at being an independent woman who nobody tells what to do; her ultimate love of the glamour of war (the soldiers, the marching) and the thrill of business that it brings along; her shrewdness; and her contempt for the hypocrisy of the military who use talk of morality to send (her) children to crusade in the name of higher things. The actress Helene Weigel does not 'smooth out' Courage's character development for us. Courage is not just a good or bad character. She is neither a hero nor a villain. Up to the very end of the play, Courage's attitude and her actions constantly contradict each other and are never resolved. Weigel's various gestures, poses and ways of talking, reveal the inconsistency of Courage's actions, her way of life (and character). Without any fault of her own, she is caught up in a time that exploits and stifles (and literally kills) any genuine human striving to be good. And although she is aware of the corrupt circumstances that she finds herself in, and is eager to protect her (virtuous) children from their destructive influence, she also loves the thrill that the chaos of war affords her. And surprisingly, at the end of play, even after her money has run out, her

children have all been killed, and peace has arrived, she still pulls her cart towards what she hopes will be the next (profitable) battlefield. Courage refuses to engage with the (admittedly complicated) question as to what kind of conditions, and what kind of human actions, might be conducive to people's genuine human striving for goodness. But although Courage is portrayed as having learned absolutely nothing from the (often self-imposed) tragedies that befall her in the course of the play, the audience is to learn something by observing and 'weighing up' her actions. 'A play is therefore more constructive than reality, because in a play the situation of war is set up as an experimental situation, for the purpose of giving insight; that is the spectator assumes the attitude of a student – provided the type of performance is right' (Brecht, 2014, p. 221).

As a basic artistic and social principle for the epic theatre, *Gestus* exemplifies Brecht's theatre's change of artistic focus. Epic theatre moves away from naturalistic efforts to carry the audience away through great emotions, direct dramatic speech and faithful (to life) stage design and costumes. Naturalism took great artistic pains to fully immerse the audience into the characters and events on stage, as if they were the *actual* events. Brecht's theatre, in turn, only produces a partial illusion. Brecht's philosophising theatre emphasises theatre's double mimetic activity. Its *Verfremdungs*-aesthetic flaunts theatre's 'repetitive' portrayal of actions that have already taken place. It focuses the audience's attention on key props, gestures and locations – to 'serve the [gestic] acting' (Brecht 1978, p. 217). *Gestus* is to serve as a 'social stimulus' for the audience to reflect on often taken-for-granted (everyday) theories and practices (e.g. of virtuous behaviour). Helene Weigel does hereby neither portray Mother Courage as a role model, or an anti-model, that is to be emulated or rejected. Despite Courage's inability to learn from her mistakes, the audience is to philosophise, practically, of how she came to be who she is. 'But even if Courage learns nothing else; at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her. (...) the question of choice of artistic means can only be that of how we playwrights give a social stimulus to our audience (get them moving)' (Brecht 1978, p. 229). The V-effekt, through the art of gestic acting in particular, is to move the audience into a pedagogical space. It aims to show 'human behaviour (...) as alterable; man himself dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them' (Brecht 1978, p. 86). Theatre's double mimetic activity is to allow actors and audiences to (re)examine the truth of theatre's presentations, and the man-made, and with that changeable nature, of our everyday 'reality'. Brecht regularly described his new theatre as being 'Non/Anti-Aristotelian' (p. 46 f.; 57 ff.)? In the next section, I will detail the difference between Aristotle's and Brecht's theatre pedagogy.

## Brecht's Non-Aristotelian Theatre Pedagogy

In his *Poetics* (1996), Aristotle defines tragedy as 'an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete; (...) performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions' (49b23). Drama (esp. tragedy) is mimesis. And mimesis is the imitations of actions by actors – in direct dialogic form, rather than indirect narration. One of the key formal elements of a good tragedy, for Aristotle, is the proper structure of events. A good plot has to be 'complete' (with a beginning, middle and end). It has to have 'magnitude'. This means that the plot requires a certain length and complexity, for the poet (playwright) to construct a series of events, which occur in sequence (build on

one another), and can give rise to a (likeable, that is not too good and not too bad) character's change from good fortune to bad fortune (50a24-51a28). A good imitation of action leads the audience to be astonished at these events, because they are unexpected but also do not just happen out of the blue. A good plot evokes pity and fear through 'reversal', i.e. actions that bring about the opposite effect to what the protagonists intended to achieve with them. Ideally for Aristotle, such reversal also brings about 'recognition', i.e. an insight into the true nature of a relationship (e.g. the moment Oedipus learns who his real mother is, we also understand the incestuous state of their relationship) (52a36-52b39). Mimetic plausibility, for Aristotle, then depends firstly on the proper, sequenced structuring of dramatic events. In short, the litmus test for the well-crafted tragedy, for Aristotle, is its ability to evoke pity and fear and their 'purification' (usually translated as *catharsis*) in the process of the audience's immersion, and movement through, the dramatic structure of events. As MacAllister (2022) reminds us however,

'(...) the concept of catharsis central to Aristotle's definition of tragedy is shrouded in mystery and has prompted significant academic debate (Lear 1988). Catharsis can be translated as either purgation, where harmful material is expelled from the body resulting in an emotional release, or purification, more akin to a religious ritual where the audience is freed of guilt (Mason 2016).' (p. 3).

Whatever the exact purpose of catharsis, Brecht questioned the basic Aristotelian premise that tragedy is to fully immerse the audience into identification with the fate of our 'ordinary' protagonist's actions (heroic and flawed) in the first place. And with that, Brecht also undermines tragedy's stated purpose, which is to bring forth the pleasure that, Aristotle claims, is specific to drama (tragedy): the arousal of the tragic emotions of pity and fear (through empathy), and their physical relief (Poetics, 53b10f; 49b27f). It is not that Brecht rejects all empathy (or emotions) in the theatre, or wishes to dismiss the playwright's difficult craft of 'preparing reproductions of human beings' life together such as lead people to a particular kind of feeling, thought and action that would not be stimulated in the same way or to the same extent by seeing or experiencing the reality reproduced (1965, p. 95). As we have seen, the (gestic) actor's work of building their character for performance is a key element in epic theatre. As shown in Helene Weigel's gestic portrayal of Mother Courage – getting inside the person that is represented, her situation, her physical characteristics and modes of thinking is a key element of an actor's work. As the philosopher in Brecht's *Messingkauf dialogues* (1965) however adds: 'It [empathy] is one of the operations involved in building the character up. It's entirely consistent with our purpose, so long as you know how to get out of him [her] again' (p. 55). And Brecht's way of 'getting out' of full identification is the estrangement effect (as exemplified in Gestus).

Brecht opposes Aristotelian catharsis, not because he denies emotions in the theatre, but because he is keen to (re)claim theatre's double mimetic activity. The (Aristotelian) theatre of illusion emphasises the spontaneous unfolding of actions in front of the audience, as if these happen for the first time. Brechtian *Verfremdungs-* theatre deliberately points to the fact that its theatrical activities are imitations of actions that have already taken place. The pleasure of recognition, according to Brecht, does not reside in a theatrical mimesis that stimulates tragic emotions and their cathartic release, because it shows the world *as it is*. He wishes to draw the audience's attention - through his *Verfremdungs-*effect aesthetic - to the

ways and means that theatre *produces* 'feeling, thought and action' (i.e. world). But Brecht also welcomes Aristotle's emphasis on theatre's mimetic function, and its status as the craft of storytelling (Poetics, 50b27-51a29). In fact, Brecht affirms: 'And according to Aristotle – and we agree here – narrative is the soul of drama. We are more and more disturbed to see how crudely and carelessly men's life together is represented (...)' (Brecht 1978, p. 183).

As is already evident, it is not that Brecht rejects pleasure as a pedagogical premise for the theatre. On the contrary, the portrayal of believable actions, and the arousal of pleasure, is still deemed as the core of epic theatrical activity. Brecht indeed agrees with Aristotle that 'tragedy [drama] is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life' (Poetics 50a16f). Drama is an imitation of events of how people deal with each other in the world. And as such, actions are more essential for a good drama than characterisation alone. 'Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality (...)' (50a24i). Flourishing, according to Aristotle, can only be achieved in action; and such actions, as to how one flourishes (or perishes) in life and death, are the stuff of theatrical mimesis. In other words, the dramatic hero has to *do* things, take risks, get involved, make decisions in life; only when they act, and experience the outcome of their actions, can they flourish or perish – and learn from their experience (or not, as we see in *Mother Courage*).

Aristotle's main premise is of course that it is only the audience's empathy with the protagonist's actions 'gone wrong' (Aristotle focuses on tragedy) - and not their good or bad character as such, which will give birth to pity and fear, and their release, in catharsis. For Aristotle, this is where the specific pleasure that pertains to 'good' tragedy resides. And it is here where Brecht disagrees with him. Although he sides with Aristotle on the playwright's need to portray plausible actions (Poetics 51b30-31), so that men's life together is not represented 'carelessly and crudely' (Brecht 1978, p. 183), he disagrees with Aristotle as to the nature of the ensuing sensation of pleasure. And he differs also as to how this specific pleasure of drama is to be brought forth *in* the craft of theatre-making. The pleasure of theatre, for Brecht, does not lie in its immersive and textual/dramatic quality first. It is not defined by its capacity to arouse tragic emotions, and their relief, in the audience through a well-constructed plot that enables our identification with our tragic, flawed hero (Poetics 52a1-3). The pleasure of epic theatre, for Brecht, is instead bound up in an aesthetic that centres around the art of acting; one that is able to instigate a joyful philosophising: an inquiry into the nature of 'human being' itself (as a verb and a noun). *Helene Weigel's* estranged portrayal of *Mother Courage* provokes us (the audience) to ratiocinate: Can/should a person be good in corrupt circumstances? What kind of conditions, and what kind of human action might be conducive to human's genuine striving for a good life?

## Conclusion: The Joyfully Philosophical Theatre

'The theatre of the scientific age is in a position to make dialectics into a source of enjoyment. The unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of circumstances, the joke of contradiction and so forth (...)' (Brecht 1978, p. 277). Brecht theatre is philosophical, because it renders striking and strange (taken-for-granted) human social behaviours. Through the art of gestic acting in particular, it opens up 'human being' as an object of inquiry on stage/in the rehearsal room. This form of knowledge that makes up theatre's theatrical imitations calls for the audience's and actors' encounter with its unique

(estranged) structure and form – towards a hermeneutic experience of truth (Gadamer 2013). The proof of the pudding is in the eating (one of Brecht’s favourite sayings), because the truth of this practical philosophical theatre unfolds in the audience’s and actors’ encounter with the social world (of actions, including one’s own), of which it speaks in its artistic imitations. The hermeneutical consequence of this interpretation of the human theatre’s horizon of meaning (on the street, in rehearsal, during performance), is that it necessarily constitutes an *unfinished* event. As the dramaturg and philosopher in Brecht’s (1965) *Messingkauf* remind us:

**‘The Dramaturg:** There is a good phrase for that in German: “der Künstler produziert sich” – in other words, the artist doesn’t just express himself but produces himself.

**The Philosopher:** It’s a good phrase if you take it to mean that in the artist man is producing himself: that it’s art when man produces himself.’ (p. 95).

As such a partial point of view, the theatrical encounter cannot guarantee a (scientific) proof that either presents a finite (and closed) answer as to the *nature* of social reality – or an exact instruction as to how one might go about changing social conditions for the better. Gadamer sums up the nature of this utopian dimension of interpretation, which also pertains to the encounter with epic theatre’s (estranged) double-mimetic, artistic practice. ‘The undecidedness of the future permits such a superfluity of expectations that reality necessarily lags behind them’ (ibid., p. 117). The craft of joyful mimesis - the double (pedagogical-artistic) work of portraying actions of previous actions - is to open a ‘horizon of yet undecided future possibilities’ (ibid.). As I have shown in this article, the theatrical encounter can indeed arouse utopian impulses (as Brecht of course wished), but also bring forth mutually exclusive expectations (What does it mean to be ‘virtuous’?). In other words, mimesis is connected to the pleasure of a philosophising stance about human, social reality, whose future is not yet decided, and about whose realisation the theatre can ultimately not directly instruct; but (only) leave its spectators and actors ‘productively disposed’ towards (Brecht 1978, p. 205).

‘(...) Our representations must take second place to what is represented, men’s life together in society; and the pleasure felt in their [the representations’] perfection must be converted into the higher pleasure felt when the rules emerging from this life in society are treated as imperfect and provisional. In this way the theatre leaves its spectators productively disposed even after the spectacle is over (...)’. (Brecht 1978, p. 205)

Through the creation of (Brechtian) theatre’s estranged imitations and metaphors about how we live together, and with the art of acting at the heart of Brechtian mimesis, we are invited to become observers of the coming-into-meaning of our ‘theories/values’ and ‘practices’. And in the process of paying attention to, and reclaiming, the experience of joy in the careful observation and imitation of the human theatre (as actors *and* audiences), we might even glimpse the nature of theatre’s pedagogical, perhaps even its utopian function: ‘to contribute to the greatest art of all – the art of living’ (Brecht 1978, p. 277). In summary: Brecht invites to philosophise: as to what kind of actions and what kind of theory/theorising (and vice versa) might nourish, or stifle, or human capacity to live a flourishing life together, in the human theatre.

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