Brecht

Brecht in Exile: Emphasizing Women in his Work and Life (in English)

OLLI@Berkeley, Winter 2016

Mondays, January 25 — March 7, 2016, 10:00 a.m. — 12:00 p.m.
(No Meeting on Feb. 15)
University Hall, Room 41B, Berkeley, CA 94720

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a prominent German playwright and poet in the 20th century. In this interactive seminar, we’ll explore a selection of his most famous plays written in exile as well as reflect on some of his popular poems, intended to be understood by ordinary people. We’ll discuss his “epic theater” and Verfremdungseffekt, a term he used to describe the technique to prevent audiences from passively identifying with the characters. Taking a closer look at the female figures in Brecht’s plays in particular, we’ll examine whether the roles of women were depicted as gender stereotypical or emancipatory. We’ll also give credit to the women who collaborated with Brecht, mostly behind the scenes, and whose creative gifts contributed significantly to “his” masterpieces, especially Helene Weigel, Elisabeth Hauptmann, Margarete Steffin, and Ruth Berlau.

Format

I highly recommend that you study assigned texts in preparation for each session (80-100 pages per week). Conducted in English, this seminar is comprised of short lectures, guiding study questions, close reading and discussion in small groups, and facilitated whole group discussions. I will make texts and additional resources available to the class. A course reader (hard copy) will be available and may be purchased for $21.00 plus tax at Instant Copying & Laser Printing, 2138 University Ave (between Shattuck Ave & Walnut St), Berkeley, CA 94704, Telephone (510) 704-9700, by January 15, 2016.

Jan 25 First Week: Señora Carrar’s Rifles

A play about the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). After losing her husband in the war, the widow, Señora Carrar, is torn between protecting her sons at home and letting them go to the front to defend Spain’s democracy against the military coup led by General Franco. We’ll also study Brecht’s biography.


Feb 1 Second Week: **Mother Courage and Her Children**

This classic play of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), written by Brecht and Steffin, tells the story of Anna Fierling, known as "Mother Courage," as she trails the armies across Europe, selling provisions from her canteen wagon. Against all odds, she is determined to save her three children from the violence around them—and survive.

Feb 8 Third Week: **The Caucasian Chalk Circle**
Set in the Soviet Union after World War II, members of two kolchos villages meet to resolve a dispute about the rights to a valley. A Chinese legend is transformed into a parable about a revolt in which a governor is murdered and his fleeing wife leaves their baby behind. The kitchen-maid, Grusha, saves the child and risks her own life. After a successful counter revolt two years later, the governor’s widow demands her child back. Grusha is brought to trial and asserts that the infant is hers. The judge decides the case after having both women compete in pulling the child from the middle of a circle.

Feb 22 Fourth Week: **Women in Brecht’s Work and Women’s Work with Brecht**
Germany in 1935: Judith Keith, a Jewish woman, decides to leave her home, country, and her Christian husband and move into exile as she experiences the threat of Nazism. She knows that her husband would lose his position as chief surgeon because of her. Although he might not buckle under the fascist pressure, he is changing.

From critical analysis of female figures in Brecht’s work (Lennox) to analyses of his work and sexual relationships with women (Katz and Cook) and a memoir by Berlau, one of his most devoted collaborators, we’ll re-examine a claim from the Second Wave Women’s Movement, “The personal is political.”


Feb 29 Fifth Week: **Life of Galileo**
After emigrating to the United States, Brecht translated and re-worked the first version of this play, on which he had collaborated with Steffin. Italian Renaissance scientist
Galileo Galilei struggles for freedom from authoritarian dogma. Unwilling to resist his passion for scientific investigation, Galileo comes into conflict with the Inquisition and must publicly recant his theories of a heliocentric model of the solar system, though in private he goes on working.

In September 1947, Brecht was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) for alleged communist connections. He testified before the HUAC on October 30, 1947, and left the USA for Europe the next day. We’ll listen to and discuss this event.


*Bertolt Brecht before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, 80th Congress, 1st session, Oct. 20-30, 1947* [sound recording]: an historical encounter / presented by Eric Bentley. Folkway Records FD5531

United States. Congress. House. Committee on Un-American Activities

**Mar 7** Sixth Week: **Brecht’s Poems**

Although Brecht is best known in the USA for his theater work, many of his poems are famous and taught in German-speaking countries. He combined poetic sensibility and social consciousness; his poems are direct, spare, functional and accessible to all audiences--intended to move the reader, not in a sentimental but in an active way. We’ll recite and reflect on some of his powerful poems.


“Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters” [A Worker Reads History] pp. 108-109,
“Deutschland” [Germany] pp. 112-115,
“Kinderkreuzzug 1939” [Children’s Crusade 1939] pp. 148-159,
“Gedanken über die Dauer des Exils” [Thoughts Concerning the Duration of Exile] pp. 166-167,