

Mack the Knife gets lost in Dallas
or - "the night I nearly met Bert Brecht"

A Critical Memoir/By Lothar Klein

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Lieber Bertolt:

It is one of my life's regrets that we never met - and we did come very close to meeting or at least an introduction. It was after a performance of Mutter Courage at the Schiffbauerdam Theater that I found myself in the company of my revered composition teacher Boris Blacher and your musical friends Hans Eisler and Wagner-Regeng. Boris, good friend of your good friend Kurt Weill, during my composition lesson at the Hochschule, often reminisced about the Dreigroschen-Oper premiere and would recall with glee what a terrific confrontation those performances were - it was a real paring-off between art and life to croon Mackie Messer to a tony audience of well-fed industrial swells. Boris, then Director of the Hochschule and President of the Berlin Academy of Arts, was always a star attraction whenever he appeared at an artistic gathering in East-Berlin; his credentials for those coteries were impeccable, having survived Hitlerism beauracracy with a Nansen passport. Born in Siberia his Russian was better than his Berliner accent. I was mightily proud to be at his side in that smoke-filled casino of the Schillbauerdam witnessing toasts of freundschaft drunk with vodka in the Russian style, namely with a thin film of pepper floating on top to filter out the impurities. I looked around eagerly watching Hans Eisler, President of the Democratic Republic's Composer's League, short, round and sweating who would raise his glass and only sip - cautiously. As Czar of music he had just chaired a panel on aesthetics under the banner "Music must become more realistic." No wonder he was nervous.

Of all those present that evening, party hacks, party poets, party musicians - who still thrilled to the names of Rosa Luxemburg and Ernst Thaeleman, Boris Blacher's memory remains most vivid for me, the rest have all distilled their anonymity in my mind like a bubbling Berliner Eintopf, that murky Berlin proletarian vegetable stew.

If I'm talking on about Boris Blacher, Bert, forgive me but he was so colorful he fits right into one of your plays. You would have liked him. During the war he wrote music for the Wochenschau and in those weekly film reports from the Russian front, everytime he had to underscore footage of Wehrmacht Generals in their long leather coats, he would compare turgid fanfares in the low brass. He really let them have it with his burbling tubas playing his minor mode existential oom-pah-pah. His higher ups never got the joke (luckily for him)-- they were too worried about Boris having had a Jewish grandmother. Each man fights the battle as best he can, even with contra-bass tubas.

But you never appeared that evening Bert, and it is my eternal regret that we did not hoist a lütje lage together and puff a schwarze stumpe together. I must console this regret and commune through this petty scribbling.

For a young student composer educated in the Mid-West, it was an exciting and heady evening which led me to thinking about your ideas about the Epic stage and how your actors are not supposed to pretend to be the character they're playing and how

your actors are supposed to be artificial and how they play their roles from the outside. Your characters are to teach a spectator to reach a verdict, to help the individual to make a decision. If all the world's a stage, I wondered how many among the evenings notables - Hans Eisler, Wagner-Regany, Harald Byrne, old Erwin Piscator, Walter Felsenstein, gentle Paul Dessau - how many of them were playing roles in that newly born Democracy which within a year would build a wall to keep the envious out of that fabled Republic. When that wall went up, Ibsen's idea of drama came into play. Ibsen's dramatic strategy is often contrasted with yours and if I recall correctly, his dramas develop around a crisis, clouds gather and finally collide with a thunderclap. Your drama Bert, seems morallistically abstract, Ibsen's realistic. That wall was certainly a thunderclap. It gave a very good slogan to some on the other side of that divided Berlin - "Lieber tot als rot." This "better dead than Red" motto caught the ears of many folks the world over.

It was a stupid argument, of course, your Galileo would have understood that immediately. Dead men don't have any power so it's a good thing that your Galileo recanted and wasn't burnt at the stake so that good mind of his could continue for the sake of his ideas and work. You taught us that. I do wonder on the other hand what certain authorities would make of the old German proverb - Gedanken sind frei.

One's thoughts are ones own - each to their own ideas. Luther's

proverb, then, is as bothersome today as ever. (Sorry if I'm becoming insinuatingly political, Bert, but I can't pretend that your political-economic stance is inessential to your art. Yes, I know that politics are damably important and the stage can certainly be used (to stress that point, yet - really - how boring!) Don't get me wrong, I'm all for the idea that the theatre be used as a night school for adults, where decisions ought to be made. But today decisions are the last things people want to make when going to the theatre.

In my admiration of your work, no one stands second to me, but, in all honesty - and you want that I'm sure, I really think your work in my day and age falls on deaf ears. You see matters have changed since your day. For example.

Would you believe that today avant-garde art hangs in the boardrooms of corporations, that the way you used to dress and look while twanging your guitar - has become high fashion? Today it costs money to look lousy. This topsy-turvy situation, this umkehrung alle werte, in Nietzsche's fine phrase, is all because of an electrical box with tubes which flashes living pictures into people's living rooms. This device really shows us events from afar (ein fernsehen!) as they happen without any alienation effect and, would you believe that in North America alone there are as many such boxes as there are inhabitants? Everyone has one and we have seen wonderful productions of your work right in front of our sofa. Not all is high culture, of course, for what people see is mostly drivel entertainment. In all

fairness though, let me add as a parenthesis, its capabilities to transmit news of the day throughout the world instantly, has revolutionized politics and people's attitudes too.

There is, for example, the leader of a Latin American country, a leader of the underdog fighting against capitalism. It seems he went to New York on behalf of his people to plead for the defense of his poor. While in that Babylon, he went shopping and purchased a pair of sunglasses costing \$3,500. American dollars. (Some shades!) This shopping spree did not go un-noticed among our news agencies and was duly reported (even into his own little country because of that infernal box. And, oh yes, I nearly forgot. Men have gone to the moon in a space ship. This too was televised, as we describe it, and millions of people saw it. The Polish government wanted to censor this spectacular event from their transmitters but, at the last minute the government wisely relented, fearing a revolt. So, you understand, all matters political, economic, cultural have undergone realignment. And would you believe that one of your early films Kuhle Wampe, the one with the final scene where the teenage hero of an unemployed family, jumps out of the window so there will not be so many mouths to feed is also shown. Before leaping to his death, he tenderly leaves his Mickey Mouse watch on the kitchen windowsill. Even that bit of celluloid hokum gets on the box. It's a frightening situation, Bert. You worried about the entertainment apparatus' appetite. This box-monster devours everything indiscriminately. It has effected-and often crushed the work and ideals of many fine artists today; it in turn influences

the very creation of any art which, however modestly, seeks some success. Let me tell you a story - one to make you weep.

Remember Arnold Schoenberg the Viennese modernist composer who invented something called the 12-Tone System? In 1924, three years before you and Kurt Weill introduced the little Three Penny Opera at the Donaueschingen new music festival on the edge of the Black Forest. Arnold Schoenberg took part in that elite and prestigious festival too. It was run by the Prince von Fuerntenberg, certainly a true macene. Arnold Schoenberg wrote a note of thanks to the Prince saying: "Your enterprise is reminscent of the fairest, alas, bygone days of art when a prince stood as protector before an artist, showing the rabble that art, a matter for princes, is beyond the judgement of common people." (Sanders, p.82).

Bert, I hear you laughing and I laugh with you. But now comes the sad part.

Arnold Schoenberg died in 1948 just at the first flicker of this television age. It is said that his last days were spent watching such a set, realizing fully a new cultural dawn had come, an age to be dominated by the facile comprehension of the eye, a dictatorial domination of the eye defeating not only the ear, but also consigning the aristocratic musical art to the populist taste preferences of the majority. High art had expired. How bitter that realization must have been. Your work, Bert, - my feeble efforts too - are up against the same thing. Art is

no longer a pure thing made by lily white hands as Flaubert thought it ought to be. Of course, art hasn't been pure for some time and I agree that art has never been on the side of the purist -- but the present mix of art and life, I'll bet, is beyond the wilder dreams of your Zeitoper or the poetry of six day bicycle racers. Art and life seem to have come closer together -- because of that infernal box. (My post-script will give you a good idea of what I mean.) A *verfremdung* of artistic values and styles has levelled all artistic endeavour into equal equations by the great mass; all art forms - popular, serious, maudlin, elevated - be it music, books, drama - are all assigned equal worth. Sadly enough even the directors of the arts, the field commanders are only too happy to accomodate the aesthetic blur. Es ist alles kaput, Bert. The Kocholniks have triumphed and you're surrounded - just like all of us.

You, dear friend, are a dated moralist who wants people to make decisions. What makes you think people have ever wanted to make decisions in the theatre? I much prefer Sophocles - really.

I mention this only because you in your essays rail against the avant-garde's naivete. The avant-garde no longer exists, yesterday's revolutionaries have become today's bank presidents. Now I happen to be fond of an avant-garde stance in the belief that new ideas are always welcome. Yet where all is permitted, and all is accepted, it's pretty hard to tweak the public nose - they wouldn't get it anyway. As an avant-garde playwright where

are your plays performed today? In universities mostly - and remember your footnote about academics - they too are part of the apparatus. Can we really debate political theatre with a government grant? Worst of all, Bert, when any artist becomes a fit subject for university symposia, that artist becomes academic and this signals the end of a living idea. Schoenberg's 12-tone method is even taught in finishing schools. Can it really be that the avant-garde attitude, the liberal stance of emancipation has been so successful that we have painted ourselves into a corner, that indeed there may be little left to do? Our audiences are like those of the fat days of Roman domestic comedy. The modernist artist is like the Bible pamphleteer in a land where everyone has been born-again. Preaching to the converted is not much fun. Die Kunst ist tot, es lebe die Kunst.

So what is left, Bert, for you or any other creative artist working in this day of survey determined artistic success. (Did you know that in a survey of concert programming, Brahms beat out Mendelsohn - too bad for Felix Bartholdy's genius). In your case matters are different, contentious as you are in Left-wing controversy. I, personally, don't for one moment believe you believed any of that Marxist stuff even though it provided you with a flexible spring board for your ideas about drama. Your essays I quite frankly find hard to take, in them you are like Wagner, you old rascal, placing your bets on opposite ends of the board so if the practice won't work, maybe

the theories will. Your theories are a source of never ending debate and delight to academic dramaturgs who couldn't write a play to save their paycheck. You stimulate conversation Bert, but conversation leads neither to decisions nor to action - as you would have us do. Decision making can be such a complicated business and very often decisions are impossible to make; - decency and sentimentality are such bad combinations. So, taking stock, we have your shelf of plays and these, for me, are the important things-in-themselves. Here is a collection of steady work, innovative, colorful and courageous,--and if they can't force decisions, they provoke thought; they are engaged, just as your life was engaged by the light that failed. In short, you are a great entertainer. Damned by the right and damned by the left, what a great position to be in, Bert!

Yours truly, a devoted fan.

P.S.: Oh yes. I promised the obligatory P.S.

(Music starts - Mozart Sinfonia in E^b K.364, mvt.II with aerobic video).

Talk about people making decisions which affect the lives of millions, let me tell you about a new craze, a fad sweeping our Western world. It is an excersize designed to make people feel better physically and to prolong a healthier life. It is a very optimistic excersize called aerobics. These devotees dress in colourful sports clothing, the annual sales of which annually equals the GNP of the DDR. ^{DDR} Dressed this way people of both sexes jump up and down to music, all sorts of music. The

exercise period begins with something very bouncy and winds down with something meditative. The piece of music millions of practitioners like best is by Mozart, the slow movement from his Sinfonia Concertante. It is a super reflective piece, all together inexplicable in the young Mozart's compositional catalogue, a piece unequalled in all music of the classical period. Musicologists from your adopted country explain its profoundly introspective quality by pointing out that it was composed during Mozart's first visit to Vienna; these historians maintain it was the result of the young composer encountering the big city poverty of the proletariat. (They should listen to the finale.)

My point is this. Imagine millions of people united in daily exercise, jumping up and down in one optimistic decision of mind and body and Mozart, consider this mind blowing juxtaposition of life and art, this blending of the sacred, sublime and profane - just imagine it - this fusion of art and life.

It's just what you and all those other moralist artists were always after, Bert!

(Music runs. . .)