Bertolt Brecht's Leben des Galilei: A Mythic Dimension in Epic Theatre

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Abstract
The history of Bertolt Brecht's play Leben des Galilei extends through the writing of its three versions during 1938 to 1955 -- a period of two decades that also encompassed the entirety of the Second World War. The period also covers the atom bomb from its development to America's use of the bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the beginning of the Cold War, which included the sustained threat that nuclear weapons might be used any day. This thesis traces, and offers interpretations of, changes in Brecht's Leben des Galilei from its inception in 1938-1939 -- when the protagonist, a scientist, is portrayed in a positive light -- through the play's American version in 1947, where it bitterly accuses science and scientists of having betrayed society and humanity, and finally to its last version in 1955, where the protagonist struggles to prevent the normalization--the familiarization--of the threat of nuclear warfare.

Next to the writing of the Leben des Galilei, the thesis also focuses on the main critical readings of the play. A large fraction of the critical readings, but not all of them, interpret the play either as a judgment of science or as an invitation to pass judgment on science.

The thesis compares Leben des Galilei with three different groups of other texts. The first comparison is with two other plays that also address the problem of science in the age of nuclear weapons, and the second comparison is with other work of Brecht himself. The first comparison leads to the observation that the muted note of optimism in the final version of Leben des Galilei is exceptional, and the second comparison to the apparently unrelated observation that it was uncharacteristic of Brecht to make explicit a certain literary allusion in Leben des Galilei. The two observations converge to a possible common explanation from a comparison with a still third group of texts, a cycle of Native American myths which appear in the oral traditions of various Native American tribes spread throughout the New World.

Finally, the thesis addresses the question of why a modern-day literary text, addressing the essentially modern problem of nuclear warfare, and addressing that problem using the essentially modern techniques of Brechtian theatre, might have structures parallel to the structures of primitive mythology.

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Bertolt Brecht 1898-1956. EPIC THEATRE. using Verfremdungseffekt (AKA the V-effect, Making strange, Distancing, Alienation) “The actor is not Lear. He shows Lear.” Verfremdungseffekt: through Fixing, Gest, Spass, and Multimedia Brecht was against naturalistic theatre where the audience “hang up their brains. with their hats in the cloakroom.” The lighting director in Epic theatre needs to abandon the idea of hiding sources of light to achieve a mysterious effect to draw the audience into the action. Brecht flooded the stage with 'harsh white light', regardless of where the action was taking place and leaving the stage lamps. in full view of the audience. Obvious lighting constantly reminds the audience they are watching a play, Epic Director. 7. Bertolt Brecht, from Leben des Galilei, quoted in Leben des Galilei Programmheft. 8. See Hayman, Ronald, Brecht: a Biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 325–78. 9. Castorf made this comment during a panel discussion of directors on Brecht entitled “Nachmittag der Regisseure, 100 Jahre Brecht”, Berliner Ensemble, Berlin, 8 Feb. 10. Voigt, Peter, ’100 Mark von Brecht’, interview with Detlev Lücke and Kathrin Tiedemann, Freitag, Berlin, 6 02 1998, p. 13. 11. Bentley, Eric, The Brecht Memoir (New York: PAJ Publications, 1985), p. 47. 12. A critics’ award is given annually to an actor, actress, director, etc., of the year in the German-speaking theatre, and published in the journal Theater. Bierbichler was the 1997 and 1998 recipient. Life of Galileo (German: Leben des Galilei), also known as Galileo, is a play by the twentieth-century German dramatist Bertolt Brecht with incidental music by Hanns Eisler. The play was written in 1938 and received its first theatrical production (in German) at the Zurich Schauspielhaus, opening on 9 September 1943. This production was directed by Leonard Steckel, with set-design by Teo Otto. The cast included Steckel himself (as Galileo), Karl Paryla and Wolfgang Langhoff.