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Updating *The Mother*: Contemporary Intermedial Approaches to Brecht’s 1931 “Learning Play”

This article argues for the continuing relevance of Bertolt Brecht’s 1931 “learning play,” The Mother, through a comparative assessment of two of its recent productions by experimental performance collectives My Barbarian (in 2013) and The Wooster Group (in 2021–22). Through analyzing the productions’ respective intermedial performance strategies, this article explores how both collectives use Brecht’s century-old play to address contemporary social and political challenges while privileging motherhood as a powerful mode of resistance.

Introduction

In January 1932, one year before Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, Bertolt Brecht’s didactic and politically incendiary play *Die Mutter* (“The Mother”) (1931) premiered at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin and subsequently played to the small clubs and community halls in nearby workers’ districts (Baxandall 10). Adapted from Maxim Gorky’s 1906 novel of the same name and written in the style of a Lehrstück (“learning play”), *The Mother* tells the story of an older, illiterate Russian widow named Pelagea Vlassova who, after witnessing the suffering and exploitation of her adult son and the other factory workers in her town, becomes radicalized and joins the Bolshevik Revolution. Throughout the play—which takes the form of fourteen short episodes and thirteen songs—the audience observes a great shift taking place within the central character of the mother: Pelagea largely quits the domestic sphere, learns to read, and becomes increasingly involved in the struggle for workers’ rights, eventually rising to a position of leadership within the movement after her son is executed. Gorky had penned his novel as a means of resuscitating the proletariat in Russia after the Tsar’s bloody

suppression of the 1905 revolutionary movement (Baxandall 9). Brecht's adaptation of Gorky's text is widely regarded by critics as having been similarly conceived as a show of support for the then-struggling German Communist Party and as a means of recruiting women, specifically, into the organization (Baxandall 28; Lennox 86). That Brecht cast his wife and longtime collaborator, the recognizable and much-beloved German actress Helene Weigel, as the first Pelagea perhaps speaks to the significance of the role for appealing to German women.

To this end, and in his production notes on *The Mother*, Brecht acknowledges that the play "was addressed mainly to women" and that its goal "was to teach certain forms of political struggle to the audience" (62). Brecht estimated about fifteen thousand working-class German women saw the production during that first tour and reacted, more than any other cohort, "with particular liveliness" to the "situations" presented (62). While Brecht's aim of instructing German workers in the strategies of labour organizing and political dissent was summarily and violently suppressed by the arrival of the Third Reich, it is inspiring to imagine the civic and political potential of those fifteen thousand working women—many of whom might have identified as mothers—engaging with this Marxist play and moving collectively towards a revolutionary consciousness of their own.

In recent years, contemporary theatre artists have returned to and updated *The Mother* through newer and more sophisticated technological strategies—comingling elements of film, recorded audio, video installation, and digital media—to more deeply exploit the Brechtian disruption that can often occur for a spectator when confronted with the convergence of media and live performance. These interdisciplinary, multi-media experiments, which I interpret through the lens of intermedial performance scholarship, have enabled contemporary theatre artists to explore new and previously untapped dimensions of the play's themes of motherhood and social change while staying true to Brecht's Marxist ideas.

I argue for the versatility and continuing relevance of Brecht's 1931 learning play, *The Mother*, and for the character of the mother as an agent of revolutionary transformation through a comparative assessment of two recent productions by US-based experimental performance collectives My Barbarian (in Los Angeles in 2013) and The Wooster Group (in New York City in 2021-22). Through investigating the productions' respective intermedial performance strategies, I also explore how both collectives use Brecht's didactic, hundred-year-old play as an allegory to comment on present-day challenges, including the intractability of capitalism, the broadening of the cultural wars, and the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. My project follows a similar logic as it was inspired by and attempts to build upon the significant archival work done by Brechtian scholar Laura Bradley about the play's unique production history

and its remarkable, while not always uniform, adaptability across generations and cultural contexts.

As a work of interdisciplinarity, this article draws on diverse categories of evidence in support of the comparative analysis. Contemporary working scripts reveal unique changes to Brecht's original 1931 text. Video and digital photo documentation offer a visual representation of the performances and specify the intermedial elements, and critical reception provides insight into critical and audience reactions to the productions. Artist interviews offer a deeper understanding of creative processes. Brechtian scholarship situates contemporary revivals of *The Mother* within the play's significant production history, while intermedial scholarship is used to understand how their sophisticated incorporation of film and digital media is both connected to but also expands upon Brecht's dramaturgy.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first section, I briefly trace the genesis of the most germane (and enduring) of Brecht's aesthetic strategies—specifically those entailing epic stage design—to better locate in the second and third sections the revision of those tactics in the contemporary adaptations of *The Mother* by My Barbarian and The Wooster Group. The findings from my comparative analysis of the two performances in the conclusion draw connections (and distinctions) between the original twentieth-century Lehrstück and its twenty-first-century heirs and shed light on the continuing power of Brecht's play to present a revolutionary vision of motherhood.

The Epic Stage: Brecht's (and Piscator's) Dramatic Theory

Brecht believed that a radical transformation of society could not succeed without an equally radical theatre transformation (Brecht 23). The playwright had grown wary of the realistic and naturalistic modes that had emerged in nineteenth-century theatre, which seemed to him to serve as powerful delivery systems of a dominant, capitalistic ideology. He wanted to provoke the audience into questioning the economic and social forces that shaped their quotidian lives—to disrupt their habitual modes of reception to get them to think critically about their exploitative and increasingly jingoistic world. As such, Brecht, together with fellow German director Erwin Piscator—the Dada-adjacent pioneer of intermedial stage design—contributed to the development of a dramatic theory known as epic theatre. According to Brecht, the goal of this new dramaturgy was “to teach the spectator a most definitely practical conduct that is intended to change the world” (Brecht, *The Mother* 133)—transforming the spectatorial act from one of passive absorption to one of critical engagement. Core to this strategy was Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (“alienation effect”), in which certain interrupting or distancing techniques—including visible displays of stage mechanics, the use

of informational placards, literary captions and documentary films, and actors stepping away from scenes to directly address the audience—work to disrupt the illusionistic and catharsis-driven tactics of Aristotelian dramatic theatre. No longer would plays “assist the spectator in surrendering” themselves to “empathy” or overidentifying with the characters on stage (Brecht, *The Mother* 8). Instead, they would provoke critical engagement and a heightened awareness of the social and political realities depicted on the stage. When viewed within the context of German society’s frighteningly quick capitulation to fascist thought, Brecht’s and Piscator’s development of a didactic, dialectical stage can also be seen as an act of resistance.

The prominent cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin observed that epic theatre was best defined “in terms of the stage than of a new drama” (98). A Berliner entering *Die Mutter*’s epic theatrical space in 1932 would have been greeted with a deconstructed design consisting of white sheets stretched between poles of a metal frame (which would serve as host to a series of projected political slogans and pictures) with wooden doors that could be opened and closed and a motley selection of instruments and musicians located onstage and in full view of the audience (Bradley 41). This renegade approach to mise-en-scène would have been jarring for theatregoers accustomed to the conventions of early twentieth-century stage design, which often included expensive and voluminous stage curtains cresting over large-scale and elaborately painted set pieces and musicians hidden away either offstage or in an orchestra pit. Critics at the time referred to *The Mother*’s stage design as “primitive” and as nothing more than “hanging out dirty sheets” (qtd. in Bradley 41). However, the epic construction—rooted in Russian agitprop practices, pioneered by Piscator and utilized by left-wing and worker’s theatre at the time—was highly strategic in its goals: it was easily collapsible and therefore mobile; it was economical and reflected the spare language of the play. It was lacking in specificity and therefore easily serving Brecht’s aim of using Russia as a model for Germany and, most significant for my purposes here, was particularly suited to the incorporation of projected media.

Initially, Brecht had planned to project a two-minute-long documentary sequence depicting the Russian Revolution at the conclusion of *The Mother* before the German police censored it (*Brecht on Film and Radio* 260–61). The projected media that did survive still managed to tout political slogans and caustic political commentary as well as intertitles and simple images, which, in turn, alerted audiences to the contradictions and injustices of the existing class structure (Bradley 38–39). To Brecht, these filmic aspects functioned “as a kind of optical chorus” with the power to “confirm or dispute” the audience’s reality (Brecht, *Brecht on Film and Radio* 6–7). Roswitha Mueller posits that Brecht’s early experiments with the moving image “impressed upon him the aesthetic exigencies specific to film” and ensured that “Brecht the dramatist

never competed” but instead “sought a discourse” with film (3). Consequently, and through a thoughtful treatment of media within its mise-en-scène, Brecht’s epic stage alerted audiences to the artificiality of the theatre—thwarting their ability to identify with a dominant ideology and encouraging them to become critically engaged spectators.

Everyone’s A Mother! My Barbarian’s production of *The Mother and Other Plays* (2013)

The performance collective My Barbarian was established in 2000 in Los Angeles by Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade to, according to their artist statement, “use performance to theatricalize social problems” (*My Barbarian*). With socially-minded productions that collage reworked historical texts, video art, painting, sculpture and drawing, DIY musical composition, and a healthy dose of thrift-shop glamour, My Barbarian’s interdisciplinary and multimedia practice is possibly best understood through the group’s concept of “showcore”—a framework that Jazmina Figueroa recently interpreted as “a self-reflexive methodology tied to the histories of musical theatre and queer camp aesthetics ... and more noncanonical showbiz devices” (“In Pursuit of the Masquerade”). Artist Farrah Karapetian interprets the collective’s performance practice as one of “sophisticated play” inspired by “Brecht’s notion that didactic theater is more effective when it is entertaining” (33).

My Barbarian’s adaptation of Brecht’s *The Mother* was initially presented in 2013, just two years after the populist Occupy Wall Street movement commandeered Zuccotti Park to protest the rampant display of economic inequality exposed in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. The company’s decision to stage its Marxist play within the white cube of the Vielmetter Gallery in Los Angeles and not in a traditional theatre or a community hall points to an intentional blurring of art and activism. This presentational strategy also gestures towards My Barbarian’s transgressive approach to interdisciplinarity, which routinely interchanges the distinct spheres of the theatre and the gallery as a means of problematizing both (Figueroa). Initially titled *Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse* (2013) and later retitled *The Mother and Other Plays* (2014), the final work at Vielmetter took the form of a multimedia exhibition consisting of the following diverse elements:

- i. a live staging of Brecht’s *Lehrstück* (loosely adapted from the original text and utilizing epic strategies of song and dance, gestic acting, improvisation, and digitally projected intertitles and artworks);
- ii. a collection of handmade papier-mâché theatrical masks and oil stick drawings activating the walls of the gallery space; and,

- iii. a twenty-nine-minute-long video installation initially titled *Working Mother* (2013) and subsequently retitled *Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse* (2014) which cites (both in the title and some segments of the video) Eleanor Roosevelt's iconic 1947 human rights document and Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis-inflected essay from 1929.

The material copresence of these various media forms and the highly layered intertextuality of the art objects, the performance, and the video installation encompass Chiel Kattenbelt's definition of an intermedial artwork in which a "co-relationship and mutual influence between different media ... challenge and subvert previously existing medium-specific conventions and allows for new dimensions of perception and experience to be explored" (24-25). An example of this reciprocal influence becomes evident when examining the dynamic role of music within the work. One of My Barbarian's adapted songs, "Your Son Has Been Shot," is performed live during the collective's staging of *The Mother and Other Plays* to mark the moment when Pelagea learns that her only son, Pavel, has been killed. It later functions as a standalone Brechtian "interruption" within the video installation. However, in its later, remediated iteration, the song is performed and filmed outdoors against the backdrop of a sun-drenched Los Angeles canyon, utilizing choreography and slick cinematographic strategies, such as close-ups and tilted camera angles. The saturated colours and cinematic sheen of this catchy musical number initiate another moment of estrangement when juxtaposed alongside the song's wrenching lyrics (adapted by Gaines from Brecht's original text):

Your son has been shot.
 He went to the wall,
 Built by men, just like him,
 And men, like himself,
 Made the weapons that shot him,
 Made the bullets that pierced his chest.
 Your son has been shot.

Thus, My Barbarian's contemporary revision of Brecht's *Lehrstück* introduces new intermedial applications for the age-old Marxist text; its theatrical (and video) intervention in the gallery also disrupts the rules governing spectatorship in such elite spaces.

Significantly, My Barbarian's multimedia performance approach in *Universal Declaration* also highlights the collective's queer, BIPOC, and feminist histories to expand the motherhood definition beyond an essentialist one. Specifically, the collective's reliance on participation, projections, and video installation invites audiences to consider multiple perspectives on motherhood and pose new, provisional definitions of what constitutes "a

mother” in the first place. Gaines describes the role of the mother in the Brechtian work as “a model for a certain kind of social relationship that is built around love ... a position that anybody can occupy” (qtd. in Sun Kim). This is borne out in the live performance at the level of representation with each of the three artists, as well as randomly chosen members of the audience, playing the role of the mother at different points in the script, which suggests, even teaches, new audiences that the role of the mother could be filled by anyone regardless of gender, race, class, or ability (Sun Kim). Still, most stagings of Brecht’s revolutionary *Lehrstück* cast a cisgender woman to play the titular role—beginning with Weigel’s defining turn as Pelagea that very first opening night in 1932. By contrast, *My Barbarian* invites audience members of all backgrounds and gender identities to step onstage and embody the socially and politically engaged mother—to read Pelagea’s lines and, at times, to lift her revolutionary red flag. This level of audience participation is unique to the collective’s updating of Brecht and encourages a questioning of societal norms as well as individual preconceptions of motherhood—rendering the work more engaging and more radical in its evocation of contemporary American discourses around reproductive rights, social justice activism, and gender roles.

As an extratextual element to the play, the video installation serves as another visual and auditory dimension extending the themes of *The Mother*. Though less didactic, the *Universal Declaration* video explores the role of the mother as a locus for change and revolutionary action through an explicitly feminist lens. Privileging the foundational feminist notion that the personal is political and elevating the autobiographical to the status of fine art material, *My Barbarian* appropriates the short, episodic structure of the *Lehrstück* to enact what the collective refers to as a “personal and political matrilineage” starring their mothers as well as their creative mentors, the feminist artists Eleanor Antin and Mary Kelly (Vielmetter Gallery). Kelly and Antin embody icons Klein and Roosevelt, while each member’s mother cocreates a brief Brechtian segment that testifies to the radical nature of their experiences with motherhood. In one segment, Jade Gordon reads aloud from her mother’s private journal from 1978 while candid, contemporary black-and-white photographs of Victoria Gordon flash on the screen. Through its accentuation of one woman’s diaristic account of new motherhood, *My Barbarian*’s video work topples the conventional notion of the mother as a self-sacrificing caretaker, instead advancing a raw and unfiltered account of motherhood grounded in lived human experience.

In another segment, Alexandro Segade’s mother, Irene, delivers a TED Talk–style lecture raising awareness around the threats faced by bullied LGBTQIA youth in schools and advocating for more allies in the classroom. Alexandro, in drag, stands beside her. Like Gordon’s confessional diary segment, Segade’s lecture segment defies popular media depictions of mothers

solely engaged in the duties of the domestic sphere. Instead, dressed in a black suit and speaking forcefully from a podium, Segade represents a powerful and public-facing figure—a mother engaged in social activism. While her advocacy for bullied LGBTQIA youth showcases maternal care and concern for marginalized communities, her lecture positions motherhood as a vehicle for political change. Through a unique formal strategy that couples personal narratives and feminist ideologies alongside epic techniques, My Barbarian's *Universal Declaration* video installation cleverly presents new perspectives on Brecht's depiction of a revolutionary mother and the play's Marxist dialectic concerning the individual and the collective.

An Epic Mother—The Wooster Group's Production of *The Mother* (2021-22)

Formed in 1975 from a splinter faction of Richard Schechner's Performance Group, The Wooster Group is an avant-garde theatre company that takes its name from the SoHo street where it works and stages productions. Led and directed by founding member Elizabeth LeCompte, the ensemble is critically vaunted for its hallmark deconstruction and reframing of canonical texts and its groundbreaking deployment of video projection within live performances. One such performance, the Obie-winning *House/Lights* from 1999, is described by intermedial scholar Ric Knowles as collaging no less than four source texts—Joseph Mawra's 1964 cult lesbian BDSM film, *Olga's House of Shame*, Gertrude Stein's 1938 "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," Mel Brooks's 1974 film, *Young Frankenstein*, and episodes of "I Love Lucy"—together with a collision of sonic forms such as, "voices filtered through sound chambers ... blips, squawks, and quacks" (Knowles 190). Whatever the intertextual citation or intermedial strategy, LeCompte's stage productions, like Brecht's, have always functioned as outliers (and keen satires) of more conventional and naturalistic theatrical traditions. Indeed, the Group's stage is so frequently posited as an inheritor of Brecht's that audiences and critics alike were surprised when it was announced in 2021 that The Wooster Group, for the first time in its nearly fifty-year history, would finally stage their first Brecht play, *The Mother*, with founding member Kate Valk playing the role of Pelagea Vlassova (McNulty).

In the Group's production of Brecht's *Lehrstück*, the imitative and naturalistic aims of Aristotelian theatre that Brecht railed against are jettisoned in favour of the company's signature postmodern, multimodal approach to structure and temporality, pursued through the sophisticated interweaving of technology, text, and experimental performance. Whereas past performances (such as *House/Lights*) visually privileged filmic intertexts through the onstage presence of multiple competing television screens, video

monitors, or both, The Wooster Group's intermedial rendering of Brecht took a subtler and not always readily apparent turn to the acoustic environment. W. B. Worthen deciphers what he calls the "complex audio sphere" of the company's unique staging of *The Mother*—one in which the prerecorded dialogue from past rehearsals and previous productions of Brecht's play (including a filmed version of the 1958 Berliner Ensemble performance in which Helene Weigel reprises her role as Pelagea) are fed into the actors' ears by way of small but visible earbuds, which they either repeat or lipsynch while the prerecorded dialogue plays for the audience (37).

I read this strategy as exercising new and relevant applications of Brecht's epic theory, albeit through an advanced technological looping that the dramatist could not have predicted in his lifetime. At the same time, this exchange of audio playback and lipsynching is sometimes invisible to the audience. Critic Helen Shaw observed in her review that sound designer Eric Sluyter's "live-mixed audio" often "plays tricks" ("The Mother"). The moments of delay in the audio playback or an actor's halting delivery of their line do serve to distance the audience from any sympathetic overidentification with the characters while also cleverly functioning as a kind of second-hand, post-cinematic citation of the Berliner Ensemble's performance film of *The Mother*. Adelita Husni Bey argues that all of this aural disharmony can indeed be seen as "innovating on Brecht's technique ... and generating greater critical distance from the original script" ("The Problem of the Missing Meat"). Worthen observes the Group's complex "interface" between the live and the mediated voices of *The Mother* "alter and amplify" for a contemporary, media-savvy audience the intended alienation of Brecht's epic theatre (131). What is the intention behind such alienation? Brecht's theory promises us that within the rift—the psychic space gifted to us by the *Verfremdungseffekt*—the concerns of our current historical context can be more readily confronted.

In addition to the experiments with live and recorded sound, *The Mother* also featured The Wooster Group's standard Brechtian practice of making visible to the audience the technologies of film, video, laptops, and digital art projections. In a more recent development, the company also started sharing short video documents of their quotidian practices as a theatre company—including crowdfunding appeals and archival gems—to its online vlog (known as *Dailies*). I found these short videos, which offer yet another intermedial frame through which to consider the lessons of *The Mother*, particularly meaningful during the COVID-19 confinement of 2020-2021, when attending a theatre performance could only take place through the intermediary of a flat screen. Watching The Wooster Group rehearsals for *The Mother*, or even archival clips from live performances I had attended years ago, granted me an experience of "liveness" that was impossible to attain otherwise. In a separate article on *The Mother* for *New York Magazine* in March of 2021, Shaw

contemplated what the potential impact the deaths of more than four hundred thousand older Americans during the first year of the pandemic might have on the audience reception of *The Mother* once it was safe to gather in a theatre once again: “When the group began working on it, nearly two years ago, Brecht’s play might have seemed militant, a rallying cry. How will the fragile, ferocious mother at its heart appear after more than a year without contact with our parents? It might well become a memorial to the elderly we’ve lost—or an ode to the ones who kept going” (“Theater Is Closed”). If, as Brecht suggested, the filmic texts deployed within a live performance of *Lehrstück* might serve as a kind of “chorus” to encourage the involvement of the collective over that of the individual (Brecht, *Brecht on Film and Radio* 6), then perhaps The Wooster Group’s *Dailies*, in some small and significant way, may also serve as a chorus to encourage a preperformance collectivity among its audiences.

In one of the promotional videos for *The Mother*, longtime company member Kate Valk says that the company was initially drawn to Brecht’s story because of the central character—a sixty-year-old woman who, after many travails, achieves revolutionary consciousness. Staring directly into the camera, Valk smiles knowingly and asks: “Now who doesn’t want that in their 60s?” (The Wooster Group). Elisabeth Vincintelli, in her review of the play and its various trans-medial adaptations for *The New York Times*, notes that after watching this particular clip and other behind-the-curtain videos on the *Dailies*, it became challenging to separate the character of Pelagea Vlassova from LeCompte, aged seventy-seven, and Valk, aged sixty-five—women artists “who continue to explore theatre with an energy and inquisitiveness people a third of their age might envy.” I, too, found it difficult to avoid drawing the company’s two influential women, the formidable lead character in *The Mother*, and even the spectral presence of the original Pelagea, Helene Weigel, into a quasi-matrilineal relationship, albeit temporarily and through the magic of the colliding media elements. Like My Barbarian’s celebration of their artistic forbearers, The Wooster Group’s privileging of a matrilineal connection between women artists serves as one of their most exciting feminist updates of the Brechtian motherhood project—evolving the concepts of motherhood and mentorship beyond their biologic and patriarchal origins and emphasizing shared experience and the intergenerational transmission of artistic knowledge as the best instruments for social transformation.

Similar to My Barbarian’s video installation, The Wooster Group’s vlog can be interpreted as an extratextual iteration of the company’s update of *The Mother*—another contemporary intermedial approach that I understand as an outgrowth of Brecht’s epic stage. These extratextual elements do not express the same kind of visual simultaneity that, say, Piscator’s onstage documentary footage might. But, in form and function, the videos on the vlog (depicting

rehearsals, translation sessions, and even the stage hands experimenting with props design and placement) still underscore the artificiality, the *constructedness*, of the Group stage, thereby provoking spectatorial awareness and running counter to, indeed transgressing, the hermetic and illusionistic practices of mainstream Aristotelian theatre, which, it must be said, are still alive and well and on view (almost) any night of the week in Midtown, Manhattan.

Findings and Brecht's Continued Relevance

In the closing chapter of her book-length work on estrangement in the theatre, Silvija Jestrovic notes that Brecht was not the first artist in history to “make the familiar strange” as a way of engaging audiences for art. She names Aristotle, Horace, Coleridge and Wordsworth as part of that lineage (153). She warns that the alienation effect, like all artistic theory, “is not immune to the erosion of time and to the processes of automatization that devour art’s potential for newness and perceptibility” and observes that the “devices” of theatrical estrangement work best when they are culturally specific, flexible and responsive to the prevailing concerns of the time (155). Jestrovic closes with the vital question still facing all theatre and performance artists today: “In today’s world, flooded with information, images, and sounds, where the distinction between real and simulated becomes increasingly blurred, how might theatre subvert the stock responses of an audience and make the well known fresh and meaningful again?” (157). In response, I would like to share a few of the key findings from my comparative analysis of the US productions of *The Mother* by My Barbarian in 2013 and The Wooster Group in 2021-22—intermedial performance works that, to my mind, succeed in making Brecht’s epic strategies “fresh and meaningful” for contemporary audiences:

- i. These two companies demonstrated a fearless commitment to the leftist politics inherent in Brecht’s original play. In My Barbarian’s adapted script, and in The Wooster Group’s newly translated one, both companies retain, and indeed use visual projections and signage to stress, *The Mother*’s original message that “communism is good for you.” To a large degree, this breaks from Bradley’s findings on the hesitancy of US theatre companies in the twentieth century to even utter the word “communism” on stage for fear of reprisal. It may further indicate that artists in progressive cities like Los Angeles and New York City feel encouraged enough by the populist rise of movements like Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter (not to mention the recent surge in public support for labour unions) to declare their affiliation with—or at least a passing interest in—Marxist thought.

- ii. Both companies also demonstrated a prolific and sophisticated application of intermedial performance strategies. Moving well beyond Brecht's initial stage design of projected slogans on white sheets, the artists in *My Barbarian* and *The Wooster Group* deployed a diverse range of intermedial strategies, such as complex looping of live and recorded sound within a performance, ancillary video installation works, and video blogging as extensions of their larger Brechtian projects.
- iii. Both productions rely on a feminist privileging of matrilineal relationships—biologic and artistic—which has the effect of exposing the limitations and failures of patriarchal systems and positing successful modes of mentorship as strategies of resistance.
- iv. Finally, a comparison of the critical reception of both contemporary productions highlights the power of Brecht's 1931 *Lehrstück* to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to still connect with contemporary audiences for art—whether they were gathered within the white cube of the gallery or the black box of a traditional theatre. *My Barbarian's* Vielmetter Gallery performances garnered critical attention, earning them a spot in the prestigious 2014 Whitney Biennial. Similarly, and after many pandemic-related fits and starts, *The Wooster Group's* staging of *The Mother* ran for a total of ten weeks in New York City throughout 2022, with invitations to perform the *Lehrstück* in theatres in both Vienna and Los Angeles.

My comparative analysis of two recent productions of Bertolt Brecht's 1931 learning play, *The Mother*, by the American companies *My Barbarian* and *The Wooster Group*, highlights the continuing relevance of Brecht's dramatic theory to life and art in the twenty-first century. These experimental companies embraced *The Mother's* anticapitalist, antifascist, and collectivist ethos, challenging what Bradley has documented as the historical hesitancy of American theatres in the twentieth century to address such themes. I believe this discursive and ideological shift reflects our increasingly changeful (and uncertain) sociopolitical landscape in the United States and the desire and willingness of working artists (and their audiences) to reengage with Marxist thought.

One of the aims of my study was to examine how experimental theatre companies were expanding Brecht's and Piscator's original conception of the epic stage and utilizing intermedial performance strategies to build out sophisticated, multi-perspectival stagings of both live and mediated elements. Through a thoughtful integration of these intermedial elements into their renditions of *The Mother*, both *My Barbarian* and *The Wooster Group* have effectively updated Brecht's century-old play—making its politics of estrangement “fresh” for contemporary audiences and re-presenting the figure of the

mother as a powerful, but still overlooked, agent of revolutionary thought and action.

Note

Bradley's 2006 *Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage* is the first and only monograph devoted entirely to Brecht's 1931 learning play and analyzes the production's history from its origins in the Weimar Republic through Brecht's exile and the division of Germany to German reunification. Significantly for my research, Bradley's work also examines French, English, American, and Irish productions that have taken up and adapted *The Mother* as a way of addressing their own specific cultural and political contexts.

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