

Bertolt Brecht in Dark Times: Racism, Political Oppression, and Dictatorship

IBS Symposium, Israel, 11-16 December 2022

“Let others speak of their shame, I will speak of my own”
Bertolt Brecht, *O Germany, Pale Mother*, 1933

The Department of Theatre Arts, Tel Aviv University, in collaboration with the Theatre departments at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Haifa University, and the Israeli Association for Theatre Research, welcome the first post-corona IBS Symposium, hoping that by December 2022 we will be able to reflect face-to-face not only retrospectively on Brecht’s “Dark Times”, but also on our own contemporary crises – not merely in the epidemiological sense.

The Symposium will offer a web of keynote speeches, panels, workshops, *Lehrformances* (a combination of performed lectures and interactive learning events), readings, and a rich artistic program and excursions, all carried out in the estranged form of a “Wandering Symposium”.

The 2022 Symposium will focus on Bertolt Brecht’s response to expressions of racism, political oppression, and dictatorship – in the era he himself termed ‘dark times’ (*finstere Zeiten*). We also intend to discuss aesthetic/political responses to inequality, injustice, and the deprivation of the freedom of speech and of movement in our own ‘dark times’, and how these responses have been inspired by Brecht’s legacy.

What were Brecht’s options for protest, resistance, and revolt? And, considering those options, is it possible to discern a Brechtian legacy in contemporary activist art? How is this legacy constructed today, in scholarship as well as through artistic creativity? Are Brecht’s theory and practice still exemplary for the relations between art and ideology, and/or between artistic creativity and political action? Raising these issues, the Symposium addresses scholars studying Brecht’s ideas and works, as well as theatre practitioners and theoreticians concerned with the issues that he himself confronted.

The *Messingkauf* dialogues will serve as the conceptual framework for these discussions. These dialogues feature a philosopher who has come to the theatre – by invitation of the actress – to explore its aesthetic, moral, and philosophical features as well as its material conditions, based on the assumption that the theatre shows how “people live together,” which is what interests the philosopher. Can his discussions with the theatre people (a dramaturg, an actor, an actress, and a backstage worker), which take place on the stage itself, after each evening’s performance, still be read today as a model for discussing the theatre and its functions?

In a section of the dialogues composed at the beginning of World War II, Brecht’s philosopher urges the theatre people to “bear in mind that we are living in dark times, when people’s behavior towards one another is particularly abhorrent and the deadly activities of certain groups of people are shrouded in an almost impenetrable darkness, so that a great deal of thought and

organization is needed in order to shed some light on people's social behavior." During such dark times, he adds, many people regard the exploitation of human beings "just as natural as our exploitation of nature", considering "great wars to be like earthquakes, as if they were not caused by humanity but by forces of nature against which the human race is powerless." Does such an eclipse of moral values incapacitate intellectuals and artists? On the contrary, Brecht responded in one of his Svendborg poems: "In the dark times / Will there also be singing? / There will also be singing. / Of the dark times." And his close friend Walter Benjamin expressed this view in even more radical terms in *On the Concept of History*, suggesting that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight." Therefore, Benjamin concludes, to improve our position in the struggle against fascism, "it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency." One might even dare asking: How can the theatre do that?

Did Brecht practice this 'attitude' (*Haltung*) in his own work during those dark times? And what can we still learn from him today, when observing/representing "people's social behavior"? These are only two of the fundamental issues which the 2022 IBS Symposium will address. Apart from discussions about Brecht's own resistance to discrimination, injustice, and violence – including cases where he did not raise his voice in protest, at least not as seen retrospectively – the Symposium will feature lectures, panels, workshops, and theatre productions exploring his legacy for our own time. There will also be nocturnal workshops in the 'spirit' of the *Messingkauf* dialogues in which selected texts of Brecht will be studied – to raise interest in his theory and practice, in particular among younger theatre researchers and practitioners.

The choice of Israel as the site for the first post-Corona IBS Symposium – whose home-base is metropolitan Tel Aviv, the first Hebrew city - embodies all the tensions these issues raise: in a country initially founded on the idea of 'setting things right' after World War II, an idea which in turn has created new injustices, while still experiencing the threats of extinction, real or imagined.

Suggestions for topics to be addressed:

- Historical Perspectives:
 - Brechtian responses to dictatorship: Nazi Germany/Stalin's USSR/post-war DDR
 - The limits of authority and the possibilities for resistance
 - Brecht's Jewish friends / Brecht and Anti-Semitism
 - Learning/Thinking/Wisdom in Dark Times: From 'Fatzer' to 'Keuner'
 - Political and Ethnic Stereotypes
 - *Buying Brass (Messingkauf)* and *How Much is Your Iron? (Was kostet das Eisen?)*/ Between philosophical, moral, social and political theatre.
 - *Kuhle Wampe* or *Who Owns the World? (Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?)*: Perspectives on Activist Cinema and the Media.

- Contemporary Challenges:
 - The 'reproducibility' of Brechtian models
 - What measures should/could be taken now?
 - Learning to Learn
 - Forgetting to Remember
 - Unintentional Misunderstandings

Symposium presentations and discussions will be in English or German.

Please submit by **February 28, 2022** abstract proposals and suggestions (up to 250 words) with a short biography for individual papers, panels, working sessions, workshops, posters and *Lehrformances* – to: brechtdarktimes@gmail.com

Presenters will be notified about the committee's selection of the proposals no later than July 31, 2022.

- Household Practicalities:

The Symposium will be arranged and conducted by the Department of Theatre Arts at Tel Aviv University, in tight accordance with the regulations and restrictions as and if ordained by the Israeli and international health authorities by the time of the Symposium.

- The Symposium will bear a unique character of a "Wandering Symposium", between the three major academic theatre departments in Israeli universities in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. Tel Aviv University will host two of the Symposium days – including the registration and the opening ceremony - and each of the sister departments will host one. The program in each location – adjusted to the orientation of the respective department and city - will include one keynote speech, panels, workshops, a roundtable, as well as a varied artistic program. The program in Tel Aviv and Haifa would, within the constraints of time, include a short city excursion. A full-day excursion of Jerusalem will round off the conference.

We would like to enhance the study and research of Brecht, and consequently welcome the participation of advanced students and young scholars. This would be, inter alia, underlined in our artistic program by featuring two of Brecht's most intriguing texts – the *Fatzer* fragment, adapted and directed by Yotam Gotal, a fresh graduate of The Department of Theatre Arts, TAU, and *Antigone*, directed by Dr. Ira Avneri, who is one of the organizing team, in addition to being a practicing stage director.

The participants are responsible for their travel arrangements and hotel accommodation (between 11-15 December in Tel Aviv; the night of the 16th in Jerusalem). A discounted stay at the convenient guest dormitories of TAU and hotels in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem will be arranged by the conveners and announced in due course on the Symposium's website.

The conference **registration fee** will be Euro 100 (US\$ 120, NIS 386); for students, unwaged and pensioners: Euro 60 (US\$ 71, NIS 228). The fees do *not* include payments for the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv excursions, performances, and farewell dinner.

Following the conclusion of the symposium, the organizers plan to publish **selected contributions** in the *Brecht Yearbook* or in the IBS journal *e-cibs* (=electronic communications of the international brecht society).

The IBS calls upon all the participants and lecturers **to become members of the International Brecht Society**, which includes a subscription to the *Brecht Yearbook*. More information can be found at <https://ibs.wildapricot.org/membership>.

Eagerly expecting your proposals, suggestions and questions.

Prof. Freddie Rokem, Prof. Gad Kaynar-Kissinger, Dr. Ira Avneri

The Steering Committee – IBS Symposium, Tel Aviv 2022