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### BRECHTIAN RULES OF CONVERSATION IN TRAINING THEATRE MAKING

1.

During 1937 Brecht propounded the idea of an international 'Diderot Society' which would circulate papers on 'theatrical science', and it is possible that some of his essays may have been written with this in mind. 'For centuries,' says his exploratory letter (*Schriften zum Theater 3*, pp. 106-10, translated in full by Mordecai Gorelik in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, April 1961), we have had international scientific societies whose business it is to organize the mutual exchange of problems and experiences. Science has its common standard, its common vocabulary, its continuity. The arts...have no such corresponding societies. This is because their structure is wholly individualistic.

He planned to approach some twenty-odd people connected with different branches of the theatre in the hope that they would agree to pool their methods, knowledge and experience in this way. How many he in fact wrote to is not clear, and so far as is known the scheme is never again mentioned in his papers. The names, however, are of interest as showing the people whose views he then thought compatible with his own. Those recorded on notes, letters or drafts are: Wh. H. Auden, E. F. Burian, Rupert Doone, Slatan Dudow, S. M. Eisenstein, Hanns Eisler, Mordecai Gorelik, Nordahl Grieg, Georg Hoellering, Christopher Isherwood, Per Knutzon, Karl Koch, Fritz Kortner, Per Lagerquist, Per Lindberg, Archibald Macleish, Léon Moussinac, Nikolai Okhlopkhov, Erwin Piscator, Jean Renoir, Sergei Tretyakov. Naturally Brecht would have left out members of his immediate entourage and friends like Neher who were still in Germany, but even so there are some notable omissions, both of former associates like Weill and of other theatre people.

Without the mutual openness and reciprocity of sharing that are the marks of Brechtian thinking, the stage, and the academy become flat and impoverished—reverting to collections or conglomerates of individuals, not ensembles of learning, training, and theatre making.

I suggest three ways in which the openness characteristic of Brecht's method can generate more satisfying playgrounds "for the theatrical sciences". Faithfully practiced, Brecht's thinking, "capable of intervention", yields more appreciation for the distinct gifts of the other, whether student or colleague; a greater comfort about the role and burden of being an authority; and more attention to the special responsibility group leaders have to others, a responsibility often captured by the concept "trust".

2.

The Brechtian teacher is genuinely open to the particularity of the other and to the possibility that the other who is learner can also teach. Brechtian "teachers" work with the people they have—not the ones they might wish for. The particularity of these others—their unique talents and skills, distinctive experiences, and caches of learning—become resources rather than matters of indifference, and certainly not liabilities.

As a result, the various competencies, the director or the instructor are attempting to promote take root in the individual's own identity and personal experiences. Learning is not seen as foreign or imposed, but becomes part of who one is. "Brechtian teaching" empowers and liberates individuals rather than constraining them. When this does not happen, the price includes continued loneliness, isolation, and little self-understanding. In the hands of the "Brechtian teacher", however the participants are open to the multidirectional flow of discourse that occurs when its members share and augment each other's learning and its implications for who they are and can become.

For theatre makers that attitude is not special. It is the basic condition for successful ensemble work and exercised understanding of thespis. But theatre training - in the frame of Academia - developed an ethos that works against these interactions. Jane Tompkins' (1996) memoir recounts her struggles in academe with what she sees as a pervasive, destructive emphasis upon personal performance. The burden of her narrative is to question a widespread culture that too often places primary value on "appearing smart" and validates personal worth through what one knows (Astin, 1997).

Contrary to what Tompkins experienced, the order of society's academic setting was one in which each member of the community of learners is a resource for the other. Colleagues were not ignored, and the plurality of viewpoints is engaged for the common good. In addition, the provisional character of knowledge was recognized. That the best of today may be revised and improved tomorrow provides grounds for hope, not a reason for relativism or nihilistic despair. It is about the changeability of the

social being.

An engaging metaphor for this mutual sharing and reciprocity is the “conversation” of the academy. David Tracy (1987) summarizes what it might entail: “Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend options if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it” (p. 19). When group leaders model this conversation for their collaborators, the best kinds of values, energy, and examples are modeled.

3.

The metaphor of dialectical conversation also says something about authority. “Brechtian teachers” work at setting to the side their natural preoccupation with issues of authority and control. This is no easy task because in some larger sense a directorial basic *gestus* is clearly responsible for the class. Working to assure others, and oneself, that the class is moving toward (rather than away from) the announced goals and learning objectives often means that one simply cannot withdraw from a position of authority. Yet, attempting to exert authority and control can clearly stand in the way of learning.

Brecht wanted to stimulate his audiences to ask questions, to stand back from the stage actions and wonder about what they saw there. Rather than accepting the actions of a character as given, inevitable, the spectator in Brecht’s theater is stimulated to question: Does it have to be this way? Has it always been so? Will it always remain so?

Such questions, asked about a dramatic action on the stage, might lead to similar questions about the spectator’s own personal and social reality. In his own plays Brecht sought to embody such a questioning attitude into the very structure of the work. *Mother Courage* tries to profit from the war, but ends up losing all her children. What does this say about the little people who try to live off war and still come out ahead? Brecht’s hero in *Galileo* is a great man of science, advocating the dissemination of scientific learning for the benefit of society. But he turns around and condemns his own teachings, subjecting himself to the Church. Could he have acted differently? What would have been the consequences for society had Galileo not recanted? At the end of *The Good Person of Szechwan*, an actor speaks an Epilogue directly to the audience: You have seen the terrible plight of a person who tries to be good in a world that does not allow for goodness. What is the solution? A different person? Different gods? Perhaps a different world? Brecht’s theater does not deliver answers ready-made, but asks questions, demanding that the audience enter into the stage events with its critical rather than emotional faculties.

4.

Being “Brechtian” is another way of speaking of this responsibility. It points us toward, and helps create, the covenantal, not the contractual, community (as existing in democratic Ancient Athens). The covenantal relationship involves committing with others to a common good, promoted through open exchange and reciprocity. Each gives others the right to ask for insight, to provide criticism, and to place a claim upon some of the individual’s time. Each accepts obligations to listen, respond and help the other. The greater the diversity of members, the greater (because the richer) the common good—so long as members remain respectful of each other and are committed to advancing the common good through incorporating members’ individual gifts.

The model of the covenantal community is often obscured by elements of the social contract, a competing model. The contract sets the limits of the interactions and specifies a narrow set of rights and responsibilities.

Other elements of this contractual view are familiar. Individuals are locked inside themselves, self-absorbed and preoccupied because they are cut off from all but transactional relationships with others. Fear is a primary emotion since others may threaten one’s own standing and security. Power is understood and sought as control rather than collaboration since advance by the other is often defeat for the self; and community is but a utilitarian convenience for an aggregation of rugged individuals where the goods of each are simply pooled rather than shared.

The list could be extended, but everything named reflects the notion of self as a substantial entity that has relationships rather than emerging from them. With its emphasis on control, the contractual concept lends itself to an emphasis upon teaching rather than learning.

By contrast, the concept of the covenantal community draws our attention to selves as rational—as constituted by relations with others and as helping to constitute them in turn. Individuals are ends, not simply means; and as ends they can contribute significantly to the experience of others.

5.

It is widely known that Brecht utilized many theatrical devices to stimulate such a critical attitude on the part of his audiences. Films, projections (announcing the contents of the coming scene), a half-curtain (scarcely concealing the stage machinery behind it), “songs” (which interrupt the dramatic action and offer ironic commentary)—all these devices have been roughly referred to as “alienation effects” (*Verfremdungseffekte*). But it should be kept in mind that such theatrical means were invented by Brecht for a greater goal of entertainment and instruction: to facilitate the discovery and exploration of reality by disrupting the normal expectations of the audience and asking the audience to think about a deeper reality behind appearances. In keeping with his methodological viewpoint. Brecht wanted his spectators to better understand the social laws working in their world. To see the connections among

social phenomena and grasp the totality of their world rather than isolated aspects of it. It is the *social* aspect of Brecht's theater that makes it distinctive; it is the fusion of the artistic and the political, the formal and the ideological that makes his theater unique. Thus, for the contemporary theater, the most fruitful approach to Brecht's theater is not to slavishly copy his theatrical techniques and devices, but to understand his *method*, his method of viewing reality and presenting plays so that reality is experienced as lively, vital and changeable.

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