

## Searching for a Home, Searching for an Audience

One of the most famous pictures of Brecht shows him during his testimony before the *House Committee on Unamerican Activities* (HUAC) in Washington DC on 30 October 1947. In this photograph, which was broadcast and appeared on the front pages of newspapers across the United States the next day, Brecht appears smoking his cigar in front of a conspicuous microphone, a setting which turns him into a murky, shadowy, almost eerie figure: the ultimate ‘smokescreen’, as a newspaper caption had it. The photo (easily available now via Google and other search engines) was a visual record much cherished by Brecht detractors – and by Brecht himself, who pasted it from a newspaper into his journal (BFA 27: 248). Brecht’s hearing, which is fully documented as an audio recording, was his final activity in a country for which, in over six years of residency, he never developed great affection or affinity, and where as an artist he had been largely ignored and unsuccessful, though immensely productive. Flight tickets to Paris for the day after the HUAC hearing had been booked in advance, and by the time, on 12 November 1947, J. Edgar Hoover ordered FBI agents in New York to apprehend Brecht for an interview, their target was long gone.<sup>1</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, in Zurich, he was now starting to plan his return to Berlin, his one and only final destination of choice.

The period between this biographical turning point and the next, his Berlin comeback with *Mother Courage* at the *Deutsches Theater* which opened on 11 January 1949 and was to be the foundation for his (and Helene Weigel’s) subsequent international fame and visibility, is among the most important and intense ones in a life not exactly devoid of high stakes and human drama. Because Brecht was quickly in limbo – by early November 1947 a conversation in Paris with the writer Anna Seghers had convinced him that an imminent and unprepared return to Berlin would spell inevitable failure – this period was a time not only for preparations to

<sup>1</sup> Parker 2014: 505. Snippets from Brecht’s appearance are regularly available on YouTube.

create a support system in Berlin but also for intellectual focus, reflection and re-calibration. The period deserves detailed attention as part of this book in particular, because it was during this time that Brecht went through his ‘Greek phase’ in which he engaged more closely and consistently than ever before or after with ancient Greek theatre, both from a creative and a theoretical perspective. This manifested itself in the writing and production of *The Antigone of Sophocles*, the model book to accompany this production, as well as the *Small Organon for the Theatre*, all of which fall within this ‘Greek phase’ as the result both of chance (the *Antigone*) and choice (*Small Organon*). As they constitute attempts to codify and experiment, summarize and calibrate, the significance of these three prospective and at the same time retrospective works for understanding Brecht’s theatre more generally far transcends the immediate socio-historical and biographical context of their creation. They are orientation points in Brecht’s artistic career, created at one of its pivotal moments – an instance of *krisis* (i.e. ‘decision’ or ‘judgement’), as ancient Greeks called it (the term is related to but still distinct from the modern ‘crisis’, and since the time of Hippocrates has been applied in the medical realm to denote the period in the progression of a disease when things may swing either way).

Most of these fifteen or so months of Brecht’s ‘Greek phase’ would be spent in Switzerland, Zurich in particular, a place which had been something of a haven for persecuted art and artists during the previous years of horror. Brecht himself had briefly been there during his escape from Germany in 1933, and it was the *Schauspielhaus* in Zurich where three of his now canonical works saw their first, and during World War II only, performances (*Mother Courage* in 1941, *The Good Person of Sezuan* and *Life of Galilei* in 1943). A biographer from Switzerland, whose work focuses exclusively on the playwright’s Swiss period, has called it ‘Brecht’s Schicksalsjahr’ (‘Brecht’s year of destiny’), correctly highlighting its overall significance while apparently being unaware that the precise term used here becomes strikingly ironic when applied to someone as strongly anti-fatalist as Brecht.<sup>2</sup> The Greek term *krisis* seems rather more appropriate in this biographical context too, as momentous decisions based on sound judgement had to be made at this point by the playwright who was seeking a personal, artistic and economic home: where could he, realistically, settle down and at the same time be successful? How and where to get access to what he had been missing most in the long period of exile, namely a theatre and an audience for all the work he had come up with during those isolated

<sup>2</sup> Wüthrich 2006, cf. also Wüthrich 2003.

but very productive years? Which publisher to approach, and which professional contacts to develop or re-establish?

Those fifteen months were a return in stages, with Brecht (ever the tactician) carefully creating and evaluating options from the periphery before taking the next, definitive step. At the same time, there was, as always in Brecht's life, a sense of urgency. Turning fifty years of age in February 1948, Brecht knew that now was the time if he wanted to make an impact beyond the common perception of himself as an *enfant terrible* of the 1920s Berlin arts scene and the author of the immensely successful *Threepenny Opera*, the one work for which he was still widely known but which he himself regarded as more of a side-product. Always aware that sudden death was only a few breaths away – since childhood Brecht suffered from a chronic heart condition<sup>3</sup> – he knew that for him, even more than for others, time was a most precious resource.

And Brecht's project was a big one indeed. His copious work completed in exile was either entirely unknown or being circulated within small and select émigré circles only. Very few opportunities for directorial work, always of crucial interest and importance to Brecht, had presented themselves during those dark years. The theoretical thinking accompanying and underlying the enterprise of re-building theatre as an art form was under-articulated, fragmented and spread over a series of writings with minor visibility. Despite the fact that *Mother Courage*, *The Good Person of Sezuan* and *Galileo*, now considered to be at the core of Brecht's dramatic oeuvre, had been performed during the war (in Zurich) or shortly after (the *Galileo* with Charles Laughton in Los Angeles and New York), Brecht had no presence in the re-emerging cultural and intellectual life of the immediate post-war years. Anouilh, Artaud and existentialist writers like Sartre were *en vogue* instead, as Brecht quickly discovered during the few days he spent in Paris in early November 1947.<sup>4</sup> Also, the young German avant-garde who would collectively become known as the *Gruppe 47* were avoiding him, as they avoided other major literary figures who were (still) in exile or just returning from it, like Thomas Mann or Alfred Döblin.

Yet, there is no reason to believe that Brecht felt deliberately left out or side-lined. In his view, after the Nazi years it was Ground Zero for the German artistic and intellectual scene anyway, especially its theatre. It had to be re-built from scratch, and Brecht saw himself as a chief architect in this monumental endeavour. That is exactly the sentiment which starts off

<sup>3</sup> The full significance and impact of Brecht's chronic illness for his life and work is appreciated and explored by Stephen Parker in his 2014 biography of the poet.

<sup>4</sup> Mittenzwei 1986 II: 211–15.

the model book for the *Antigone* (*Antigonemodell 1948*, which was written in 1948 and published in 1949). The passage in question deserves to be quoted at some length:

Der totale geistige und materielle Zusammenbruch hat zweifellos in unserem unglücklichen und Unglück schaffenden Land einen vagen Durst nach Neuem erzeugt und, was die Kunst anbetrifft, wird sie, dem Vernehmen nach, hie und da ermutigt, Neues zu versuchen. . . . Sie wird es keineswegs leicht haben, wieder zu ihren Mitteln zu kommen und sie durch neue zu ergänzen. Der schnelle Verfall der Kunstmittel unter dem Naziregime ging anscheinend nahezu unmerklich vor sich. Die Beschädigung an den Theatergebäuden ist heute weit auffälliger als die an der Spielweise. Dies hängt damit zusammen, dass die erstere beim Zusammenbruch des Naziregimes, die letztere aber bei seinem Aufbau erfolgte. So wird tatsächlich jetzt noch von der 'glänzenden' Technik der Göringtheater gesprochen, als wäre solch eine Technik übernehmbar, gleichgültig, auf was da ihr Glanz nun gefallen war. Eine Technik, die der Verhüllung der gesellschaftlichen Kausalität diene, kann nicht zu ihrer Aufdeckung verwendet werden. Und es ist Zeit für ein Theater der Neugierigen! . . . Wie nun ein solches Theater machen? Es ist schlimm an Ruinen, dass das Haus weg ist, aber der Platz ist auch nicht mehr da. Und die Baupläne, scheint es, gehen niemals verloren. So lässt der Aufbau die Lasterhöhlen und Krankheitsherde wiedererstehen. Fieberhaftes Leben gibt sich als besonders starkes Leben aus: niemand tritt so kräftig auf wie die Rückenmärkler, die das Gefühl in den Fußsohlen verloren haben. Und dabei ist es doch das Schwierige bei der Kunst, dass sie ihre Geschäfte, und seien es die aussichtslosesten, mit vollkommener Leichtigkeit betreiben muss. So mag es gerade in der Zeit des Wiederaufbaus nicht eben leicht sein, fortschrittliche Kunst zu machen. Dies sollte uns anfeuern.

The total intellectual and material collapse has without doubt created in our country, unhappy itself and bringing unhappiness to others, a vague thirst for new things, and as far as art is concerned, the word is that here and there art is being encouraged to try new things. . . . It will not at all be easy for art to re-gain its means, and to replace its means with new ones. The quick decline of artistic means under the Nazi regime apparently happened almost unnoticeably. The damage done to the theatre buildings is much more striking these days than the damage done to the style of acting. This is connected to the fact that the former only happened at the collapse of the Nazi regime while the latter took place during its installation. Thus there is still talk, actually, of the 'glamorous' technique of Göring-theatres, as though such a technique were transferable regardless

of what its glamour had fallen onto. A technique which served to obscure societal causality cannot be used to throw light on it. And it is time for a theatre of the curious! . . . Now, how to make such theatre? It is a bad thing about ruins that the house is gone, but the space is not there any longer either. And the blueprints, it seems, never get lost. Hence the reconstruction allows the places of vice and sickness to rise again. Feverish life pretends to be extremely vigorous life: no one treads as forcefully as paralysed people who have lost all feeling in the soles of their feet. Note, however, that this is the difficulty of art: that it has to go about its business, even the one with virtually no prospects, with complete ease. It may, therefore, not exactly be easy to make progressive art, especially at the time of re-building. This ought to spur us on. (Brecht *Antigonemodell 1948* Preface, BFA 25: 73f.)

The bleak picture of the current situation painted by Brecht here should not obscure the optimism and entrepreneurial vigour which underlies and inspires his writing. If anything, the magnitude of the challenge and the prospect of confronting it as an artist only served to energize him even more. Now, at the age of fifty, he had the experience, the drive and the opportunity to make a real difference, finally.

Typical of Brecht's mindset at this particular time is the use of medical and, especially, architectural metaphors which pervades the opening of the *Antigonemodell 1948*. The former express the posture of the curious and invested scientific observer which Brecht always loved to adopt (it is worth pointing out that in his early years around 1920 he had briefly, and superficially, been studying medicine at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich). The latter bring out Brecht's sentiment towards his home country Germany and its theatre as a wasteland and a site of ruins. Architectural metaphors can be found in several important journal entries made in Switzerland, a country unscathed by the devastations of the war, months before Brecht got to see the first actual ruins when going to Berlin in late October 1948, thirteen and a half years after fleeing from the Nazis by the skin of his teeth in February 1933.<sup>5</sup> And it is perhaps no accident that Max Frisch, the young and at that time not particularly well-known Swiss writer who Brecht befriended in Zurich almost instantly, was working as an architect and on at least one occasion showed him actual building sites (including a swim park he himself had designed).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> BFA 27: 256 (12 December 1947), 27: 268 (15 April 1948) and 27: 279 (23 October 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Journal 11 June 1948 (BFA 27: 271), where Brecht makes negative comments on these building projects. A picture taken in April 1948 captures Frisch, architectural drafts in hand, showing Brecht around (Hecht 1997: 824).

## The Politics and Pragmatics of Re-building

As if building a new theatre were not difficult enough a task in and of itself, it came with serious additional complications. In the post-war years, the many artists, academics and intellectuals faced with the issue of finding a new home, or re-connecting with their old one, experienced first-hand that the narrowly personal was inseparably linked with the globally political in a world of quickly emerging and hardening Cold War polarities. The inescapable reality of ubiquitous 'zero-sum game' situations in this political climate meant that a decision for one path was likely to exclude any other path, a scenario not necessarily suited to Brecht's personality which, for all his polemical rigour in matters intellectual, liked having options in personal and practical affairs.

For Germans wanting to return to their home country this conflict was exacerbated by the fact that they were forced to take sides and choose systems within their own country, the capitalist West or the communist East. This division, which shaped the immediate post-war years, was institutionally cemented just after Brecht's *krisis* year 1948 with the official creation of two German states, the Western *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* in May 1949 and the Eastern *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* five months later. The set-up in which Brecht found himself in this kind of general climate is a pragmatic hybrid very much worthy of an artist who also knew how to survive in the real world. With the strong endorsement and funding by the East German government he would, as of late 1949, have his own Berlin theatre company and (eventually) venue in East Germany, the *Berliner Ensemble* which from 1954 occupied the *Theater am Schiffbauerdamm* (the same theatre which had seen the premiere of the *Threepenny Opera* back in 1928).<sup>7</sup> In addition, Brecht would have a West German publisher (Peter Suhrkamp), hold an Austrian passport and use a Swiss bank account.

The contrast with Brecht's big and much-envied artistic rival Thomas Mann, who also had to flee from the Nazis to the United States, is instructive. The bourgeois Mann, a Nobel Prize winner (in 1929) and Brecht's senior by twenty-three years, had been incomparably more successful and integrated in America where he gained citizenship in 1944 and which he considered his home until he too was called to testify before HUAC in 1951. As a result of this

<sup>7</sup> Barnett 2015 is the first comprehensive history of the *Berliner Ensemble* from its foundational years under Brecht until 1999, based on thorough and careful archival research.

uninspiring experience, in 1952 he too went to Zurich, as Brecht had done five years prior. But Mann made it clear that he had come there to stay, which he did until his death in 1955 with only the occasional visit to his homeland Germany (both the West and the East). Unlike Brecht, Thomas Mann had shortly after the war been urged publicly in an Open Letter by the author Walter von Molo to return to Germany and its people who, von Molo argued, 'at their innermost core' ('im innersten Kern') had nothing in common with Nazi crimes. This was the kind of argument that started to be made frequently by artists and intellectuals who had remained in Germany during the Nazi years and often claimed to have retreated into 'inner emigration' ('innere Emigration', which quickly turned into something of a catchphrase). Mann replied in the autumn of 1945 in another Open Letter entitled 'Brief an Deutschland. Warum ich nicht nach Deutschland zurückgehe' ('Letter to Germany. Why I won't go back to Germany'). This fascinating document, which caused a major stir upon publication and repays reading from the perspective of the twenty-first century, is characterized by Mann's profound ambivalence towards Germans as a people simultaneously capable of the highest culture and the greatest atrocities. For all its allure, it is a country which Mann is frightened by: 'Es ist, das müssen Sie zugeben, ein beängstigendes Land. Ich gestehe, dass ich mich vor den deutschen Trümmern fürchte' ('It is, you have to concede, a scary country. I must admit that I fear the German ruins').<sup>8</sup>

If the ruins of Germany made Thomas Mann apprehensive, those same ruins (material, moral and emotional) had a rather different effect on Brecht who, by contrast, was deeply attracted by the other side of the same coin: the prospect of re-building. Part of the reason for this is ideological, since from the perspective of the Marxist cultural materialist the downfall of Germany into fascism, holocaust and subsequent total defeat was the logical, indeed inevitable, consequence of its capitalist economic system which had been bound to develop into fascism. It came as no surprise at all, but was only to be expected. And now that everything was indeed in ruins, Brecht felt it was his time more than ever before. Re-builders were needed, and Brecht's concern for being part of creating a new, peaceful Germany was without doubt deeply and genuinely patriotic. But pragmatic considerations are operative in Brecht's

<sup>8</sup> Mann 1945: 2009. The quote is from p. 76.

choices as well. Unlike Thomas Mann, the seventy-something novelist of Nobel Prize world-fame, Brecht, the fifty-something theatre practitioner whose career had effectively been suspended by the Nazis, saw himself as a man with a mission – a mission which could not possibly be completed without his physical return. While Thomas Mann was complete, Brecht was still under construction: he was, in his own way, ‘in ruins’ himself. To (re)build himself, he needed a theatre, and he needed a German audience to sit in it, rather than a predominantly Swiss or Austrian one.