
LETTERS

THE EDITOR:

Your two Brecht issues [T37, T38] have been most informative. I'm a bit sorry, though, that you did not include more on Brechtian acting. It seems that any director who admits to an acquaintance with Brecht's writings is asked again and again by actors and others to explain how Brecht is acted. None of the New York Brecht productions seems to have answered these questions satisfactorily.

Joe Chaikin's interview [T38] was most helpful. At the time he and I visited the Berlin Ensemble, we were playing with the Living Theatre in West Berlin; as we were in all the productions, we were unable to get a night off to see an Ensemble production. But the Ensemble people were most hospitable to the LT actors, inviting us to watch rehearsals, having us to lunch at the theatre canteen. One of them invited us to his home after the show (in *West Berlin*: he said living was "more comfortable" there; this was several months before the Wall was erected); several of his colleagues came along. One of them was a tall, handsome, blonde Aryan type who had given up a promising commercial theatre career to go to the Ensemble. I recognized him as the Sergeant in the *Mother Courage* drumming scene I had watched being rehearsed. He had been in the company about a year, and he said that it took about that long to "unlearn" everything he'd learned about acting in the past—the first requirement of an actor in the Ensemble. It was during this evening that our host made the comment to us—which Joe repeated—about the Brechtian actor con-

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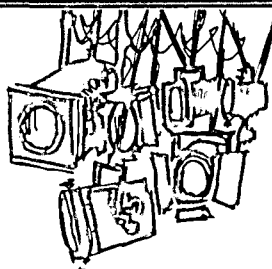
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cerning himself first with the character's socio-economic position. Emotions come later, our host continued. This, and Carl Weber's comments in T37 about work determining behavior, are the keys to the Brechtian approach.

But there is more to be said, in terms of the actor's attitude and responsibilities. In the rehearsals I watched at the Ensemble, I was astonished at the clarity and the uncluttered behavior of the actors. Anyone used to the naturalistic mannerisms of even our best actors could not help but notice how the Ensemble actors concentrate on simple exchanges between people and select their behavior with such care that each movement seems inevitable. It does, somehow, allow one to be aware of what the actor is *not* doing, as well as of what he *does*, as BB said. For the actors have an inner confidence and security quite unknown to American actors, a kind of watchful stillness at the center. So there is no relapse into neurasthenia, unless

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it is called for (as in one of the rehearsals we watched, a scene from *Arturo Ui*).

The other, and more uncanny, aspect of the acting that I noticed was that the actors were dealing directly with each other but at the same time I had the feeling that they were talking directly to *me*. And they did it with respect for me: as if I *mattered*! I've never been faced with such an attitude in the theatre before. It seems that these actors feel that their audiences are worthy of respect—that they are capable of thinking, of getting the point, and of changing things. The audience is not just a bunch of faces painted on the backs of the seats, or a crowd of tourists to be wowed, but individuals to be regarded, allowed for, and subjected to specific illustrations of social transactions.

The point is that the actor is a member of the same society as the audience, not alienated from it. He is charged with the responsibility of drawing the relationship, for the audience, between the mythical world of the play and the real world of that society. It is assumed that he is capable of such responsibility. This means that the actor must be something of a social thinker, at least enough to have drawn certain conclusions about how certain people behave in certain situations, and what they could have done instead, and what we can learn from this.

So we are in a world where the actor's own attitudes are of interest. Imagine. We assume that he has a brain, and that he does not submerge his own personality so totally in the character he is portraying that he is unable to make the ironical comment that Brecht requires. He keeps something of his sense of *self*. He seems, therefore, to have a kind of personal dignity we are not used to from actors. It is, of course, the existential dignity of commitment to a dynamic situation.

Everything in contemporary American acting training defeats this. The actor is estranged from society, he prostitutes himself daily, is assumed to be mindless, is taught to concentrate only on his character's

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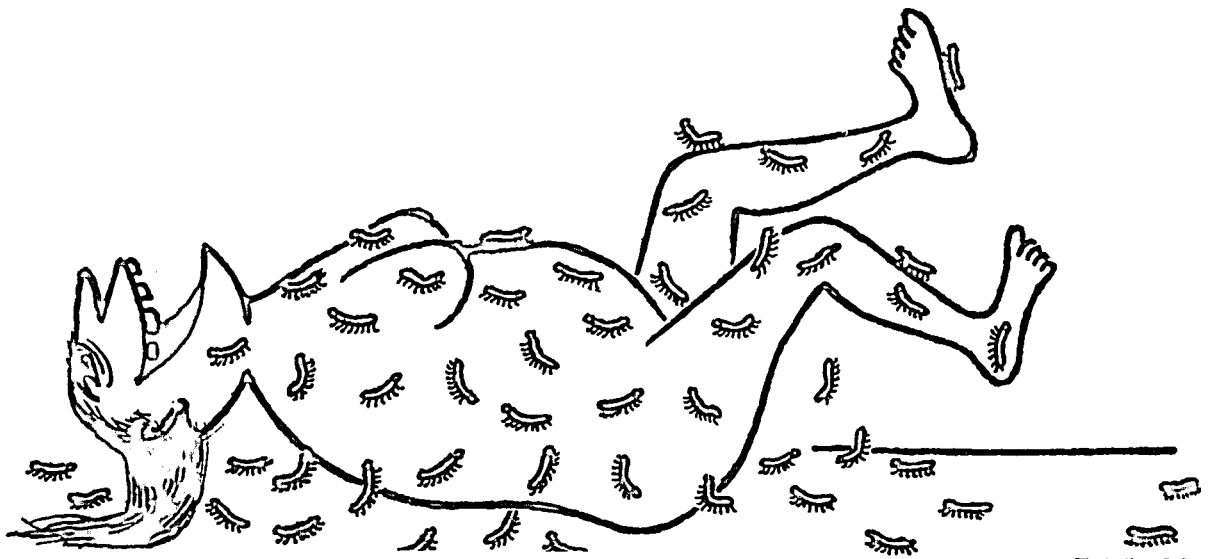
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The first thing the German actors did when they arrived in the morning was to greet each other. With Germanic formality (though without heel clicking, I was relieved to see) they shook hands all around. It took several minutes. They hadn't seen each other since the previous evening, when they had all played a show together. Their respect for each other as craftsmen was renewed with the handshake, and they proceeded to the work of the day.

*Peter L. Feldman
New York City*

THE EDITOR:

It would have been nice if my good friend Eric Bentley [T38] had mentioned that he was not alone in "beating the drum for Brecht a quarter century ago." As I once

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