This is the published version (version of record) of:

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30033014

Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 1996-2010, Double Dialogues
Glimpses of a Better World: the plays and poems of Bertolt Brecht

John Jacobs

Deakin University

SYNOPSIS

In the plays and poems of Bertolt Brecht lurks a story partially concealed and highly elusive, though persistently approached. For Brecht, the hidden story is the story which can only unfold in a better world than this one, the story with the happy outcome that very few of his plays lead to, the most striking exception being The Caucasian Chalk Circle.

Consider poem V1 of Brecht's "1940"

My young son asks me: Should I learn Mathematics?
What for? I feel like saying. That two bits of bread are more than one
You'll see that anyway.

My young son asks me: Should I learn French?
What for? I feel like saying. This Reich is going under.
Just rub your hand across your belly and groan
And you'll be understood.

My young son asks me: Should I learn history?
What for? I feel like saying. Learn to stick your head in the ground
Then maybe you'll come through.

Yes, learn mathematics, I say, learn French, learn history!

'What for?' is like an aside in a play; a question distancing us slightly from the story of the child, from the path the child is seeking to plot. It is an impulsive response to the questions asked (very logical, in a way, in 1940, yet impulsive for all that.) The father rejects this answer finally and replaces it
with a more considered, a shrewder, response. Yet the happier ending implied by the last line is still merely that, an implication, scarcely glimpsed, and still a long way away.

Brecht's protagonists frequently find themselves having to become shrewder, like this father, more strategic, in seeking not to lose sight of that hidden world, or not to induce others to lose sight of it. They develop a harder, sharper eye, disguising their true feelings, their fears, just as this father does. In the present study I will explore this latter kind of hiddenness as well.

Hidden Stories: This phrase, title of last year's Double Dialogues conference at the University of Melbourne, suggests we turn now for a moment to the word "story". Brecht is a wonderful storyteller, and his plays frequently and most resonantly employ that word and its synonyms.

Consider the opening of his 1930 play *The Exception and the Rule*: the actors come out and address the audience.

We are about to tell you the story of a journey. An exploder and two of the exploited are the travellers. Examine carefully the behaviour of these people. Find it surprising, though not unusual. Inexplicable, though normal. Incomprehensible...though it is the rule.

Or here is how (in the English translation by James and Tania Stern, with W.H.Auden) the Singer begins the main story of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*:

Once upon a time
A time of bloodshed
When this city was called
The city of the dammed
It had a governor.
His name was Georgi Abashvili
Once upon a time.

He was very rich
He had a beautiful wife
He had a healthy child
Once upon a time.

We can see in the two openings quoted above how explicit Brecht is about his plays being, or at least containing, 'stories' and indeed, for a playwright frequently misleadingly thought of as drily didactic, how excited he is about this. Of course the word story implies the notion of beginning, middle and ending; and Brecht was most concerned about the moments at which his plays ended: in particular about the state of mind of his audience as they rose from their seats to leave the theatre. He wanted every one of them, as the play
ended, to be thinking at once of how a more satisfactory ending might be approached, how a better, fairer life might evolve; and this is where the phrase 'hidden stories' now really begins to come into play and to apply to Brecht's legacy.

Most of Brecht's plays end unhappily. The hidden world, then, both for him and for his audience, is that implied, but scarcely glimpsed, happier world, that happier ending, to which I referred in my first paragraph above, and of which the epilogue to his play *The Good Person of Setzuan* speaks. At the end of this play Brecht has one of the actors-any of the actors, it doesn't matter which-come back on stage and address the audience.

You're thinking aren't you that this is no right Ending to the play you've seen tonight? After a story, exotic, fabulous, A nasty ending was slipped up on us. We feel deflated too. We too are nettled To see the curtain down and nothing settled. How could a better ending be arranged? Could one change people? Can the world be changed? Would new gods do the trick? Atheism? Materialism? It is for you to find a way, my friends, To help good people arrive at happy ends. You write the happy ending to the play. There must, there must, there's got to be a way.

In this play three gods- three scruffy, dishevelled, seemingly very human gods-are sent from heaven to earth in search of a good person, and they have trouble finding one. They stumble into a drought-stricken town in China and at once have difficulty finding someone to put them up for the night. When the first door is knocked on by their guide, we hear just the response "No!" When the second door is knocked on, we hear "Keep your gods. We have our own troubles." Then their guide, a local of the town, has an idea. He says he believes Shen Te the sex worker, a very generous, kind-hearted person, surely won't say no. And indeed she doesn't say no, she puts the three gods up for the night. This is quite remarkable in such a depressed, poverty-stricken town. (As Brecht once said, "Grub first, then ethics.") It seems that a good person at last might have been found, and the play goes on to test and explore this premise. As the story unfolds, Shen Te finds it terribly difficult to remain good in the company of people who hungrily exploit her generosity and push it far beyond its possible limit. "When we extend our hand to a beggar" she says to the gods near the end of the play, "he tears it off for us/ When we help the lost, we are lost ourselves/ And so/ Since not to eat is to die/ Who can long refuse to be bad?" Grub first, then ethics.

For Brecht the hidden story is the story with a more hopeful ending as in poem VI of "1940", the elusive ending which hardly any of his plays has: the story of
a new world scarcely glimpsed, a world which Brecht the student of Hegel and Marx saw as constantly evolving according to the fundamental dialectic of history, a never-ending process. I referred above to Brecht's legacy: That legacy, strongly imprinted on both the live performance and film and television of the latter 20th and early 21st centuries, is in large part the evolution of the notion of theatre as forum, theatre as assembly for the discussion of questions of public interest. Anticipating the work of his great disciple Augusto Boal, who died only last year, Brecht turns poetry into a forum in "1940" and drama into a forum at the end of *The Good Person of Setzuan*.

Let's look for a moment, then, at the endings of some of Brecht's other plays.

At the end of *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) McHeath is recaptured, taken to be executed, and reprieved in a deliberately artificial happy ending.

*Mother Courage and her Children* (1940) ends tragically with the death of Mother Courage's only surviving child, Kattrin. Mother Courage has now lived through the deaths of her three children in the war into which they are all caught up.

Brecht's first play *Baal* (1920) ends grimly with the very lonely death of its protagonist.

*The Good Person of Setzuan* ends, just prior to the epilogue quoted above, with Shen Te, on trial, appealing to the three Gods now judging her.

```
I can't tell how it was
But to be good to others
And to myself at the same time
I could not do it
Your world is not an easy one, illustrious ones

As I lay prostrate beneath the weight of good intentions
Ruin stared me in the face
It was when I was unjust that I ate good meat
And hob-nobbed with the mighty
Why?
Why are bad deeds rewarded?
Good ones punished?
I enjoyed giving
I truly wished to be the Angel of the Slums
But washed by a foster-mother in the water of the gutter
I developed a sharp eye
The time came when pity was a thorn in my side
And, later, when kind words turned to ashes in my mouth
And anger took over
I became a wolf
```
Find me guilty, then, illustrious ones

But know:
All that I have done I did
To help my neighbour
To love my lover
And to keep my little one from want
For your great, godly deeds I was too poor, too small.

The gods then blusteringly depart the stage, unconvincingly reassuring Shen Te that she will be all right, and leaving her in the power of her enemies. When I wrote above of Brecht's characters having to develop a harder, sharper eye, I was thinking of this speech. And when I wrote of Brecht's protagonists becoming shrewder, more strategic and dissembling, I was thinking of the way in which Shen Te in this play is compelled to invent and then embody her ruthless, pragmatic cousin Shui Ta.

I was also thinking of Brecht's Galileo. *The Life of Galileo* (1939) ends with the protagonist under house arrest and apparently defeated by the Italian Inquisition. However, Galileo manages to smuggle a copy of the Discorsi, the climax of his life’s work, out of the country with the help of his former pupil Andrea. There is a little hope here; a glimpse of a better world.

The title of *Happy End* (1929), like the ending of *The Threepenny Opera*, is ironic. The story ends with the characters, some of whom are gangsters, and some of whom have a Salvation Army background, uniting to form a bank. (One of Brecht's more prophetic sayings, which I often think of these days when I do my banking in Australia seventy years later, was "What is the robbing of a bank to the founding of a bank?")

*The Rise and Fall of the City Mahogany* (1928-9) and *St. Joan of the Stockyards* (1930-31) both end very bleakly.

In a didactic radio play for children, *The Flight over the Ocean*, originally titled *The Lindbergh Flight* (1928-9) a flier (Lindbergh) describes his solo flight of 1927 across the Atlantic. His enemies—Fog, Snowstorm, and Sleep—express their determination to beat him; but in the end he lands, and the work ends in praise of man's achievement in flying. I thought of this radio play when I recently saw the movie *Up* (2009).

In *The Measures Taken* (1930) a group of Communist activists in Russia are ordered to discard their old identities, to disguise themselves as Chinese and to travel from Headquarters in Moscow to China, in order to spread the word of Communism in the Chinese factories and in other places in that country. One of these, a young man who strongly anticipates the character Shen Te, the good woman of Setzuan, keeps getting himself, his colleagues and the whole venture into trouble through his impulsiveness and naiveté. In one scene he is
sent to the home of a wealthy Chinese businessman to seek funding for a project; but the young activist is so disgusted by the callousness and greed of his host that, just as dinner is about to be served, he cries out "I can't eat with you!" and storms out of the house, leaving the deal unsealed and the businessman's suspicion aroused. The chorus which follows this scene reflects on the misguidedness of the young Comrade.

With whom would the right-minded man not sit
To help the right?
What medicine would be too bad
For a dying man?
If finally, you could change the world
What task would be beneath you?
Sink down in the filth
Embrace the butcher
But change the world, it needs it.

In the end the young Comrade agrees to be shot dead by his colleagues and to have his body dissolved in a lime pit, so that the work might proceed effectively. Back in Moscow the Party Leaders rule that this killing was justified and that the mission has been successful.

So The Measures Taken (like the play of which it seems to be the prototype, The Good Person of Setzuan) ends grimly; yet we are invited to consider that an even more depressing outcome may have been avoided, and that in the difference between those two outcomes lie clues which may help us as we pursue our own lives into the future outside the theatre. As Keith Dickson wrote in a study of Brecht entitled Beyond Utopia, Brecht did not seriously envisage a state of absolute perfection as a realistic socio-political objective. But he did share the basically optimistic belief of the dialectical materialists 'that human society is in a state of continuous flux, incessantly striving towards higher forms. The utopian dimension of Brecht's work functions as a social conscience, continually reminding us how far we still have to go'(1978:8-9).

Let us turn now to the exception to the rule, the ending of The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1945): This play has a wonderful, though improbable outcome. Here a judge must give his verdict in a case in which two women compete for the custody of a child. On the one hand there is the child's biological mother, who has no loving feelings toward it and who deserted it in order to run more effectively from her enemies. This is Natella Abashvili, the rich and beautiful wife of a governor, referred to in the Auden translation of the story's opening, quoted above. Her opponent in this case is Grusha, the servant girl who had saved the life of the child when it was deserted by Natella. Grusha loves the child dearly, though she is not its biological mother. Keith Dickson puts it well when he writes "improbable coincidences engineer the conventional happy ending. Grusche's case is tried by the only magistrate in all Georgia who could conceivably find in her favour, and it is his last case. He was all but lynched by
the troops and owes his unexpected reprieve to the fact that in a fit of momentary compassion he had saved the life of the Grand Duke, who turns up again in the nick of time. In other words, justice was the merest fluke.' (1978:157).

The judge questions Grusha. He asks her 'Don't you want [this child] to be rich?' And then the singer/narrator says 'Listen now to what the angry girl thought, but didn't say'

_He sings:_

- He who wears the shoes of gold
- Tramples on the weak and old
- Does evil all day long
- And mocks at wrong.

- O to carry as one's own
- Heavy is the heart of stone.
- The power to do ill
- Wears out the will.

- Hunger will he dread
- Not those who go unfed
- Fear the fall of night
- But not the light.

(Once again these English words are W.H. Auden's.) The judge then awards custody of the child to Grusha. This happy ending in a way recalls the endings of two great earlier plays of the Western tradition, Euripides' _Alcestis_ and its close cousin Shakespeare's _Winter's Tale_. In both of these plays a woman who, we were sure, was dead, returns to the stage and is re-united with her husband. As James McCaughey has suggested, although these earlier plays end most satisfactorily, we leave the theatre more sad than happy. They end with someone coming back from the dead, but their 'final impact is that no-one ever will' (1972:44). On the other hand, in relation to the endings of his own plays, Brecht would probably not like the employment of the word 'never'. It is like the end of poem VI of '1940' which Brecht refuses to let end on too dark a note: 'Yes, learn mathematics, I say, learn French, learn history!

I will close as I began, with (a section from a translation of) one of the poems: 'On Everyday Theatre' (1929-33.)

- You artists who perform plays
- In great houses under electric suns
- Before the hushed crowd, pay a visit some time
- To that theatre whose setting is the street.
Here the woman from next door imitates the landlord:
Demonstrating his flood of talk she makes it clear
How he tried to turn the conversation away from the burst water pipe.
A drunk gives us the preacher at his sermon, referring the poor
To the rich pastures of paradise. How useful
Such theatre is though............... 
These actors do not, like parrot or ape
Imitate just for the sake of imitation, just to show that
They can imitate; no, they
Have a point to put across. You
Great artists, masterly imitators, in this regard
Do not fall short of them! Do not become too remote
However much you perfect your art
From that theatre of daily life
Whose setting is the street.
Take that man on the corner: he is showing how
An accident happened. This very moment
He delivers the driver to the verdict of the crowd: the way he
Sat behind the wheel, and now
He imitates the man who was run over, apparently
An old man. Of both he gives
Only so much as to make the accident intelligible, and yet
Enough to make you see them. But he shows neither
As if the accident was unavoidable. The accident
Becomes in this way intelligible, yet not intelligible, for both of them
Could have moved quite differently; now he is showing what
They might have done so that no accident
Would have occurred. There is no superstition
About this eyewitness, he
Shows mortals as victims not of the stars, but
Only of their errors.

Most of us encounter Brecht initially through the plays or through the theory;
as a poet he is less recognised, in spite of the formidable volume of his output,
and of the prominence of poetry in the texts of the plays. This imbalance most
likely stems from the mistranslation into English of a single key term from the
theory, Verfremdung, which has come to be commonly understood to mean
'alienation'. The German word closest in meaning to 'alienation' is in fact
Entfremdung. Verfremdung is more accurately translated as de-familiarization
or estrangement. To sharpen this definition we can revisit the opening of The
Exception and the Rule:

Find it surprising, though not unusual
Inexplicable, though normal
Incomprehensible, though it is the rule.
In 'On Everyday Theatre' we can see all three elements together: drama and theory, encapsulated in a poem. And the glimpse of a partially hidden story, a better world than this one, is there once again, as the man on the corner explores how the accident could have been avoided.

References


Docter, Pete (2009). *Up* (animated film) (Disney/Pixar Studios)


Stern, James and Tania, translators, with W.H. Auden, Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (London: Methuen)

Willett, John (1978). *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen)


15/12/2010