



# BRECHT, TURKISH THEATER, AND TURKISH-GERMAN LITERATURE

Reception, Adaptation,  
and Innovation after 1960

ELA E. GEZEN

*Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature*

*Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture*

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Innovation after 1960

Ela E. Gezen



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*Anneme ve Babama*



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## Introduction

IN 1968 DRAMATURG KÄTHE RÜLICHE-WEILER, a former member of Bertolt Brecht's theater company, the Berliner Ensemble, remarked that "of the fifty-three countries in which Brecht was staged in the ten years following his death, more than half are not in Europe but in Asia, Africa, and Latin America."<sup>1</sup> Brecht, generally regarded as the most influential playwright of the twentieth century, died in 1956, but his theoretical writings and dramaturgical practices shaped many of the debates—albeit to differing degrees—about the politics of culture in divided Germany throughout the politically tumultuous 1960s. The impact of his work went far beyond a German or even a narrowly defined Cold War context. He was, as this book will demonstrate, a key figure in Turkey, where a period of liberalization following the military coup of 1960 saw the emergence of a new generation of politically engaged intellectuals who sought to link culture to politics, art to life, and theater to revolutionary practice in the service of effecting societal change. I will, moreover, highlight this period's significance for Turkish-German literature, exemplified by authors such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Aras Ören. For decades, I will argue, Bertolt Brecht has connected two literary histories that have as a result become ever more intertwined. Studying how Brecht's thought was first interpreted by theater practitioners in Turkey, and then by Turkish writers living in Germany enhances our understanding of the intellectual interchanges that shaped the emergence of Turkish-German literature.

The Brecht-Dialog, the context for Rülliche-Weiler's remarks, was the first international Brecht conference, which was convened in East Berlin in February 1968 in honor of Brecht's seventieth birthday. With the motto "Politics at the Theater"—a phrase taken from Brecht's *Katzgraben-Notate*—it had been organized jointly by three prominent East German cultural institutions, the Berliner Ensemble, the Academy of Arts, and the Center of the International Theater Institute (ITI), which conceived of the conference as an "encounter of progressive theater practitioners and literary scholars from many countries" and placed the practicability of Brecht's working methods in differing social settings at the center of their agenda.<sup>2</sup> A special issue of the leading East German theater journal *Theater der Zeit*, titled "Brecht auf den Bühnen der Welt" (Brecht on the Stages of the World,



1968), included “national reports” by many of the conference’s participants, in which they discussed how Brecht influenced theater in their respective countries, and whether they encountered difficulties staging Brecht.<sup>3</sup> While national specificities and sociopolitical realities differed across the board, contributors all insisted that their engagement with Brecht was not based on mere imitation. Instead they pointed to intersections between Brecht’s dramaturgy and their respective local or national traditions (as for example in Egypt and Sri Lanka), arguing that they were adapting—rather than merely adopting—Brecht’s aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years later, in 1978, the Brecht-Dialog reconvened in East Berlin, in commemoration of Brecht’s eightieth birthday this time, with the theme “Art and Politics” and drew participants from forty countries. Continuing the emphasis on international discussion and exchange, and including countries from all “Three Worlds” (with the Federal German Republic listed as a foreign participant), one of the colloquia organized by the Berliner Ensemble and the Brecht Center of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was titled “Problems in the International Reception of Brecht.” It was attended by theater practitioners from the GDR, Egypt, Sudan, France, Japan, and the United States, among others. As a participant in this colloquium, director Manfred Wekwerth emphasized that what was under discussion was the “Brecht Method” itself, rather than “individual results.”<sup>5</sup> He further acknowledged an increasing interest in Brecht in “Third World” countries, while at the same time pointing to reservations about Brecht and also some rejection of his ideas in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). He also addressed current discussions regarding Brecht’s usefulness in the GDR, as a state that resolved its “class antagonism.”<sup>6</sup> His colleague, dramaturg Joachim Tenschert, similarly underlined the growing interest in Brecht beyond Germany and Europe noting that “in Arabic countries, sub-Saharan Africa, and in Latin American countries, for years there has been a strong, almost hungry recourse to Brecht.”<sup>7</sup> While not in attendance in 1968, this time Turkey was represented through prominent Brechtian director and actor Genco Erkal as well as actress Zeliha Berksoy (both important figures in the Turkish reception of Brecht, but also in the context of Vasif Öngören’s theater work, to which I will turn in the first chapter).<sup>8</sup>

In the context of this Brecht-Dialog, representatives of the “developing countries” asked for a separate meeting, which resulted in the next Brecht-Dialog in 1980 solely focusing on Africa, Asia, and South America.<sup>9</sup> The reasoning behind this request, as addressed in the ensuing publication, was the perceived difference in focus: foregrounding an emphasis on the transformation of societal conditions instead of focusing on aesthetic questions, deemed central to European colleagues.<sup>10</sup> In his introduction to

the proceedings of this event, Werner Hecht noted that “the adaptation of Brecht” was given precedence over mere “Brecht reception . . . which takes the Brecht text or Brecht source solely as stimulus or point of departure.”<sup>11</sup> He further remarked that the “appeal of Brecht in developing countries can be traced to his method, which specifically demands the political incorporation of art into the societal process.”<sup>12</sup> This point was reinforced by literary scholar Magdi Youssef, who directed attention to the necessity of transforming Brecht’s work, even to the point of “rewriting it,” to adapt it to local concerns and circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

In 1993 Brecht scholar Marc Silberman pointed to a “disparity in Brecht reception,” addressing a “non-synchronicity” of Brecht reception in the “Three Worlds.” Specifically, Silberman contrasted the canonization, professionalization, and institutionalization of Brechtian theater in Europe and North America with Brecht’s role “in the so-called Third World of Central and South America, Asia and Africa” where his “work has played and continues to play a vital role in theatre for articulating the emancipatory political process of national transformation.”<sup>14</sup> Like the participants in the Brecht-Dialog conferences, Silberman foregrounded how in the non-Western world practitioners and theorists alike stressed theater’s significance for intervening in sociopolitical processes.<sup>15</sup> In fact, at the seventh international Brecht symposium, organized by the International Brecht Society, which was held in 1986 in Hong Kong, participants from twenty-five countries weighed in on precisely these issues, with a special focus on Africa and Asia.<sup>16</sup>

Why begin with this discussion of Brecht’s reception outside Germany, the non-Western world in particular? In addition to the disparity with regard to the geopolitical differences in Brecht reception pointed out by Silberman, Turkey, apart from the Brecht-Dialog in 1978, seems to be absent from this international discussion—or at least in the documentation thereof. In this book I will not enter into a discussion on the changing politico-economic, ideological, or diplomatic issues regarding Turkey’s position in relation to the so-called Three Worlds, nor will I attempt to discuss the usefulness and accuracy of this rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> However Turkey’s referential status as a non-European and non-Western country located at Europe’s periphery is certainly an important factor for my consideration of Turkish-German cultural exchange in the postwar period, specifically with regard to the implementation, adaptation, and transformation of Brecht in both the Turkish and Turkish-German contexts.

While the theoretical and practical conversation about Brecht reception beyond Europe and the United States has evolved, with the inclusion of Brechtian theater aesthetics in Africa, East and South Asia, South America, and the Middle East, perspectives on the reception of