

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE REVIEW

an international journal

Editor in Chief
Franc Chamberlain

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No Man's Land: East German Drama After the Wall

Issue Editor David W. Robinson

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CONTEMPORARY THEATRE REVIEW

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

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Introduction

David W. Robinson

The political events of *annus mirabilis* 1989 marked a rare turning point in world history, but the significance of the year for German literary history is unique. As the 40-year-old German Democratic Republic ceased to exist, so too did the special circumstances which had fostered a literature separate from and in competition with that of the Federal Republic of Germany. A new period of literary history was delimited almost overnight: GDR literature now was something to be examined as a whole, completed cultural movement. At the same time, the literary traditions of the GDR have continued to influence the contemporary cultural scene, often in ways that are only gradually becoming clear.

This collection of essays, memoirs, and plays represents an early attempt to assess and reassess one of the GDR's richest cultural domains: its theater. More than any other artistic form, theater embodied and fulfilled the GDR's ambition to surpass the West in cultural as well as political consciousness. The presence and influence of Bertolt Brecht in the early 1950s—the formative years of the East German state and its cultural policies—guaranteed that its theater would command world attention, setting a pattern of innovation and social critique that would outlast the GDR itself. The Communist authorities for their part regarded theater as chief among the other arts in its potential for public education and personal transformation; accordingly, they devoted sizable resources to it, creating a multitiered theatrical establishment that made classic and modern stage works available (at negligible ticket prices) to a public extending far beyond the traditional theatrical center of Berlin, and to all strata of society. By the 1980s, GDR dramatists such as Heiner Müller and Christoph Hein were acknowledged to be among the most important dramatic voices of the German stage, with Müller in particular acclaimed as Germany's preeminent postmodern playwright. The contributors to this collection analyze and document the roots, development, disruption, and future prospects of one of the 20th century's important stage traditions—and today, surely, the most endangered one.

The unfolding of GDR literary and stage history must be understood in light of East and West German political history, to which it remains securely tied. As noted above, the original impetus for a distinctively Eastern theater was almost wholly political: it was to be socialist theater. Of course, as the reigning definitions of

socialism changed, so too did the demands placed on playwrights, directors, and actors. The major phases of GDR cultural-political history provide a context and principle of organization for this highly varied collection.

1

Late Stalinism vs. Brecht

From the founding of the GDR in 1949, through Stalin's death in 1953, and up until Khrushchev's "secret speech" at the 20th Soviet Party Congress in 1956, GDR cultural policy was largely dictated by Soviet policy, in particular the crudely didactic, anti-Modernist doctrines of Socialist Realism. Along with advocates of innovation in the other arts, Brecht fought for a broader understanding of socialist art until his death in 1956. Christoph Funke ("The Brechtian Legacy of Theater in the German Democratic Republic") outlines Brecht's influence and its consequences in later years. Joachim Lucchesi ("From Questioning to Condemnation: The Debate over Brecht/Dessau's 1951 Opera *Lucullus*") uses hitherto unavailable archival material to shed light on one of the formative episodes of GDR cultural policy, and Carl Weber ("Periods of Precarious Adjustment: Some Notes on the Theater's Situation at the Beginning and after the End of the Socialist German State") recounts his personal experiences during the same controversy and in the subsequent one concerning Hanns Eisler's *Johann Faustus*.

2

De-Stalinization

From 1956 to 1964, a thaw in Soviet Bloc cultural policy coincided with the emergence in the GDR of a vibrant, indigenous literature. The most important political event in the GDR during this period—the building of the Berlin Wall—helped more than hindered this cultural flowering by stabilizing the economy, abating the atmosphere of political crisis, and perforce redirecting the attention of intellectuals to internal concerns. Among dramatists, Heiner Müller established himself as heir to the Brechtian stage tradition. Jost Hermand ("Discursive Contradictions: Questions About Heiner Müller's 'Autobiography'") assesses Müller's own recent account of his career during these years and afterward. Ulrich Profitlich and Frank Stucke ("'Only limited utopias are realizable': On a Motif in the Plays of Peter Hacks") survey the career of another representative playwright who rose to prominence during this period.

3

Retrenchment, critique, thaw

The end of de-Stalinization under Brezhnev slowed but failed to stop cultural liberalization in the GDR. Müller and others were punished and vilified to varying degrees, but pressure from critical authors grew throughout the late 1960s and mid-1970s. Where open criticism of the regime was impossible, coded criticism in such forms as reworked classical myth became a stock-in-trade of the GDR stage, as Profitlich and Stucke show in their discussion of Hacks. Upon assuming power in

1971, Erich Honecker announced that GDR literature was to be free of “taboos” and thereby initiated a significant (if short-lived) cultural thaw. (The GDR was courting world opinion in a successful effort to gain admittance to the United Nations, diplomatic recognition from the NATO powers, and somewhat normalized relations with West Germany.) The early 1970s saw the emergence of the young dramatist Christoph Hein, who would become a major presence by the end of the decade; his distinctive form of political/artistic engagement is discussed by Anthony Meech (“Christoph Hein: ‘Engagement’ in the German Democratic Republic). Ann Rider’s edited interview with actress Walfriede Schmitt (“‘Not Peasant Stew! Real Theater for the People’: Walfriede Schmitt Talks About East German Theater”) provides an insider’s account of theatrical life extending from this period to the present.

4

The Biermann Affair and aftermath

The tentative and uneven liberalization of the early Honecker years came to an abrupt end in late 1976 when balladeer Wolf Biermann, a left-wing critic of the regime, was refused reentry to the GDR after a Western concert appearance and stripped of his citizenship. While the leadership of the Writers’ Union endorsed the government’s action, many of the GDR’s most prominent writers (including playwrights Heiner Müller and Volker Braun, novelist Christa Wolf, and poet Stephan Hermlin) signed an open letter of protest. The subsequent governmental harassment of the signatories and their allies drove dozens of talented writers, directors, actors, etc. into Western exile over the next several years. Christoph Funke’s article recounts the impact of the Biermann Affair on the East German stage.

5

From Glasnost to the *Wende*

The 80s saw a very gradual loosening of cultural controls, though nothing as dramatic as in the early 70s; meanwhile, external political events again became a driving force for internal policy. With the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to power in 1985, the Soviet Union embarked on internal reforms in the direction of democratization, striking terror in the hearts of a GDR leadership already unsettled by the Solidarity movement in Poland. The GDR distanced itself from the Soviet policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, while its citizenry became increasingly restive. Rising expectations for reforms and unprecedented outrage over electoral fraud was met with total governmental intransigence (Tienanmen Square being cited with admiration in some quarters as the “Chinese Solution”), leading by the spring of 1989 to a rapid deterioration of public morale. The newly opened border between Austria and Hungary provoked a flood of illegal emigration reminiscent of the months before the Berlin Wall was built, and as the summer wore on, the economy faltered, bled of its work force. Meanwhile, intellectuals and artists formed the GDR’s first independent opposition group, the New Forum, and churches and theaters became hotbeds of anti-government protest. The situation climaxed during the GDR’s 40th anniversary celebrations, when Gorbachev let it be known that he would no longer back the Honecker regime with arms to quell internal disturbances. Shortly

thereafter, Honecker was forced from power when his own lieutenants proved unwilling to use force to put down the peaceful protest demonstrations that had been filling the streets of Berlin, Leipzig, and other cities. The *Wende*, or turning point, culminated (symbolically, at least) in the opening of the East German border on November 9, 1989. It was during this eventful year that Christoph Hein's satiric comedy *The Knights of Round Table* was produced and quickly seized upon as a critique of the Communist regime; the play, published here for the first time in English, was soon canonized (correctly or not) as the archetypal *Wende-play*, a process discussed by David W. Robinson ("Christoph Hein Between Ideologies, or, Where Do *The Knights of the Round Table* Go After Camelot Falls?") and Phil McKnight ("Iphigenia, King Arthur, and the East German State after Unification").

6

Reaction, unification, recession

The New Forum's dream of a liberal socialist state independent from West Germany was soon overwhelmed by resurgent nationalist sentiment (the Eastern protest marchers' slogan changed from "We Are The People!" to "We Are One People!") and by electioneering from the better-financed Western political parties. Revelations from newly opened Stasi or secret police files aggravated a mood of disgust with the old regime. Against this background, West German journalists and cultural commentators began attacking the artistic and moral integrity of leading East German writers, among others. The first round of politically-motivated criticism was aimed at Christa Wolf's short novel *What's Left*, but it soon spread to Müller as well, aided by revelations of both writers' past contacts with the Stasi. These attacks on the once-respected grand figures of GDR culture set off a debate that came to be known as the *Literaturstreit*, the literature quarrel, involving writers, critics, and media figures in both Germanies. The history and significance of this debate are analyzed by Katrin Sieg ("The Poets and the Power: Heiner Müller, Christa Wolf, and the German *Literaturstreit*").

While revisionist critics were busy condemning what they had formerly praised, or else declaring that there had been no such thing as East German art, the artists remained active, though in many cases distracted by the pace of political change that culminated in October, 1990, with German unification. Marc Silberman's translation of Jochen Berg's *post-Wende* play *Strangers in the Night* provides a fascinating look at how the Brecht/Müller dramatic tradition has survived the fall of the GDR. Marna King ("Viewer Beware: Reception of East German Theater") surveys critical reaction to recent German theatrical productions, raising important questions about the differences between Eastern and Western audiences' experiences and expectations of drama, as well as the ways in which Eastern directors are exploiting the conditions of the unified German stage. Rebecca Rovit ("Towards German Unity: Performance within the Threshold") brings a performance studies perspective to bear on the transformations taking place in Berlin in both the theaters and the streets.

The most recent external force to affect the German (and particularly the East German) stage is the economic recession that has settled over the unified state. Unofficial estimates placed unemployment in the "New Federal States" at around one-third during the difficult early years of privatization and industrial reconstruction,

a period with no end in sight as this is being written in mid-1994. The inevitable reduction in theater subsidies which followed the demise of the GDR's generously-funded theatrical bureaucracy has been sharply accelerated by the economic crisis; more recently, even Western theaters have been shut down in cost-saving measures. Phil McKnight ("Iphigenia, King Arthur, and the East German Stage after Unification") gauges the recent mood and assesses the future of a theater community plagued by budget cutbacks and political malaise.¹

Special thanks go to Marc Silberman for his assistance in the early stages of this project, and to the Department of English and Philosophy at Georgia Southern University for its logistical and financial support. And finally, thanks to Wade Krueger for his proofreading help, and to Caren Town for everything else.

David W. Robinson
Georgia Southern University

¹ For a comprehensive study of the historic role played by theater in GDR society, see Ralph Hammerthaler, "Die Position des Theaters in der DDR," in *Theater in der DDR: Chronik und Positionen*, edited by Christa Hasche, Traute Schölling, and Joachim Fiebach (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), pp. 151–261.

The Activist Legacy of Theater in the German Democratic Republic

Christoph Funke

GDR theater was shaped from the beginning by a strongly antifascist, progressive intent, working on the assumption that people could be turned into socialist “New Men” by exposure to positive role models. Yet it soon became apparent that the GDR regime was really interested in holding power, not in social innovation—as Brecht found. Brecht nonetheless left a lasting impression on GDR theater, which clung forever after to his idealistic vision of an intellectual, probing, imaginative theater. A vibrant theatrical establishment grew up not just in Berlin, but throughout the GDR. The theater became a place of social comment and critique, a role which continued through and after the collapse of the GDR in 1989–90. This living “interventionist” tradition, directly traceable to Brecht, is now endangered by a wave of German theater closures.

KEY WORDS: Brecht, Hein, Braun, Müller, Plenzdorf, theater closures

The critical, definitive concepts for theater in the German Democratic Republic were Enlightenment and Reason. After the victory over fascism—i.e., the total defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945—the central aesthetic assumption in the Soviet occupation zone and, since 1949, the GDR, was that art must fulfill a pedagogical function. Reeducation was called for, rejection of fascism, orientation toward a rational, peaceful way of life. That people could be educated through exposure to positive role models was an article of faith; the experience of art could be used to engender correct, ethical modes of behavior which, of course, would be useful in the building of socialism. The demands placed on theater were great from the start, since this is where people actually stand on a stage playing to other people. If virtuous human beings, genuine heroes, stood on the stage, then the maximum possible number of people among the audience would be moved to virtue, to heroic deeds, to passionate work, and to exalted love. And because this point of departure initially seemed beyond ethical reproach, because the “New Man” really was desirable and needed, many theater artists were in fact won over to the ideal of a militant, realistic theater. The theater of the GDR thus began as the consequence of a simple theory of representation: everyday reality and artistic reflection had to be as congruent as

possible with one another. (One of the most important dramatists in this vein was Friedrich Wolf.)

But as it became apparent that the GDR's ruling party, the SED, was less concerned with the "New Man" than with hearing its power, wisdom, and infallibility praised, and that this Communist Party arrogated to itself the right to pass judgment on art and to permit or forbid it according to whim, conflicts broke out between artists and cultural politicians. The first and most significant person to run up against the small-minded realism doctrine was Bertolt Brecht. Following his 1949 return to Berlin from American exile, he engaged in a long struggle for his own theater. The Berliner Ensemble had, indeed, already been founded by Helene Weigel in 1949, but it was not until 1954 that Brecht was able to occupy the theater on the Schiffbauerdamm and give his Berliner Ensemble a home. There were vehement arguments with the comrades: in a regime so preoccupied with pedagogy, the refusal of Brecht's *Mother Courage* to learn anything from her experiences was regarded as a near-provocation; Brecht had to alter his *Lucullus* opera; and he passionately defended Hanns Eisler, whose *Faustus* libretto had run afoul of narrow-minded Marxist dogmatism.¹ Almost every Berliner Ensemble production became embroiled in violent controversy, whether it was Goethe's *Urfaust* or the new play *Katzgraben* by Erwin Strittmatter. In this way Brecht became an example of what cunning, what sly intelligence, what strength was necessary to wring compromises from the functionaries, to neutralize them in discussions, or to take literally their lofty declarations of intent. The poet could only endure this so long; his early death in 1956 was not least a result of the ceaseless disputes, coupled with his deep shock over Stalin's crimes, which were revealed to the whole world at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble nonetheless exerted a lasting influence on the theater in the GDR. The dramatist had subordinated his aesthetic labors to enlightened reason. He sought the self-aware, self-possessed man with his fate in his hands and with insight into the historical mechanism, the complexities of the class struggle. He developed a theater that raised thinking to a delight, that made the winning of insight a source of sensual pleasure, that shunned naturalism and pinned its hopes on exactitude—the exactitude of depicted situation, of gesture, of the word. The productions of the Berliner Ensemble were radiant, lively, and deft, free from pomposity and sentimental ballast. The Berliner Ensemble was pursuing a magnificent vision: a future built of intelligent, curious, imaginatively gifted people, a realm of creative freedom and boundless fulfillment of the individual.

As the world-wide reputation of Brecht's theater grew, its connection with the reality of the GDR diminished. The dream was persecuted, the vision—of reason, intelligence, independence—which had its place on the stage had long since disappeared from everyday life. And the theater of the GDR would henceforth inhabit this split between ambitiously humanistic goals and wretched social reality. Enforced affirmation of the prevailing situation and support for the SED's ideological line coexisted for decades with increasingly resolute attempts to influence

¹ See the essay by Joachim Lucchesi in this issue of CTR for a discussion of the *Lucullus* debate, and the essay by Carl Weber for an account of the debate around Eisler's *Faustus*. (Ed.)

the situation, to change it. Conservative theater directors (Karl Kayser in Leipzig, Hanns Anselm Perten in Rostock, Maxim Vallentin in Berlin at the Maxim-Gorky-Theater), dramatists, and dramaturges clung to a belief in Socialist Realism, while younger ones such as Gerhard Wolfram and Horst Schönemann in Halle strove to break new ground, and had the courage not to conform, but to illuminate critically their everyday reality by posing questions instead of handing out answers.

Another distinguishing mark of theater in the GDR was that although "Berlin, Capital of the GDR"² remained the undisputed theatrical center, important influences constantly streamed in from the great provincial theaters. Through the efforts of important members of the theater community, varying focal points of innovative theatrical work arose which challenged the artistic supremacy of the East Berlin stages. Only a few examples can be sketched here. During the 1960s, the work of Artistic Director Gerhard Wolfram and director Horst Schönemann turned the Landestheater Halle into the most vital and exciting stage in the GDR. Their attempt to take audiences beyond mere artistic contemplation and, with them, to try out the possibilities of creative intervention in living reality still followed from belief in a humane socialism. Yet the dramatists Armin Stolper and Ulrich Plenzdorf (author of the controversial *New Sorrows of Young W.*) were already turning out plays that angrily broke all bounds of agreement with the policies of the SED. After a decade in Berlin (at the Deutsches Theater), Wolfram and Schönemann carried on with their work in Dresden, transforming the State Theater there into the GDR's theatrical Fountain of Youth throughout the 1980s. Wolfgang Engel worked there, Christoph Hein and Volker Braun were produced there—mostly in the face of bitter opposition by functionaries of the SED.

Other theatrical centers outside Berlin were also of great significance. Christoph Schroth awakened the theater in Schwerin from its Snow White sleep and, throwing his theater open to playfulness and experience, produced daring, youthfully impetuous stagings of classic plays. The repertory was chosen as a vehicle for reflecting on revolution. With Heiner Müller and Volker Braun (after Brecht) as the most important authors, complex theatrical evenings would explode cramped historical consciousness by considering the tragedy (yes, the tragedy) of revolution. Müller, Braun, Hein, and Stolper played a decisive role in the turnabout of GDR theater: they attacked naive beliefs about the inevitability of human progress, the capacity of socialist revolution to solve every problem, and the validity of the Communist Party's pronouncements.

Schroth's accomplishments in Schwerin were not an isolated case; theaters in various parts of the GDR were sites of courageous, first-rate work all through the seventies and eighties. Gerhard Meyer's theater in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz once more) was a talent factory for actors and directors; in Weimar there was director Fritz Bennewitz (known for numerous productions in foreign countries, particularly India), in Potsdam, director Peter Kupke. The theater world of Berlin also experienced tremendous upheaval. The directing career of Alexander Lang began under the leadership of Gerhard Wolfram at the Deutsches Theater, and Artistic Director Albert Hetterle of the Maxim-Gorki-Theater championed the officially

² The designation of East Berlin by this omnipresent slogan was meant as a challenge to the official Allied view that all of Berlin was still under Allied occupation. (Ed.)

disfavored Russian dramatist Mikhail Schatrov, as well as Ulrich Plenzdorf after his fall from grace, and the always suspiciously watched Volker Braun. Hetterle also discovered Thomas Langhoff, the current artistic director of the Deutsches Theater and a towering figure among German theater directors.

Nonetheless, it cannot be forgotten that the theater community of the GDR also suffered terrible defeats, that it could not avoid accommodations with power, and that not a few of its members were abjectly servile. Widely differing reactions followed the so-called “Biermann Affair” of 1976, when the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann (a friend of Marxist-apostate philosopher Robert Havemann) was denied reentry to the GDR after giving a concert in the Federal Republic of Germany. His expulsion was protested by writers such as Volker Braun, Heiner Müller, Ulrich Plenzdorf, Thomas Brasch, and other notables. The Party put out a call to the faithful, and many artists who had once been expelled because of their work now allowed themselves to be misused once again, among them the actor and singer Ernst Busch. But it proved impossible to patch up relations among the artists of the land. In particular, directors, actors, and set designers forsook the GDR—among many others, actor Armin Mueller-Stahl, actress Angelica Domrose, actress Jutta Hoffmann, actress Hilmar Thate, set designer Andreas Reinhardt, director Matthias Langhoff, and actress Katharina Thalbach. Brecht director Peter Palitzsch had already gone after the building of the Wall in 1961, and now, with the collapse of Ruth Berghaus’s directorship at the Berliner Ensemble, directors Einar Schleef and Bernd K. Tragelehn followed. Many others as well departed the “socialist” German state.

Anyone who wished to realize Brecht’s “interventionist” theater in the GDR had to withstand constant political wave motion. Every time the theaters made a hard-won gain in freedom, the Party struck back with new dogmatic restrictions and pressured people to leave the country—particularly the gifted ones who were unwilling to conform. But the reservoir of such gifted, rebellious theater people continually renewed itself. It was for this reason that in 1989, the theater community of the GDR was able to become a motor of social change. Theaters in Berlin, Dresden, Karl-Marx-Stadt, and Schwerin became places of discussion and argument, of questioning and protest. As in the similar case of the churches, these theaters and others had long since drawn together people who shared a desire for a different, humane socialism. In the theater, artists and audiences together found a place removed from the Communists’ absolute claim to power. Performance and its reception were governed by special rules: the secret but steadily more open understanding, the increasingly unmistakable critique, of the vicious degeneration of socialist ideals. In October, 1989, a guest performance in Berlin of Christoph Schroth’s Schwerin production of Schiller’s *William Tell* turned into a manifestation of the will to freedom. After responding to the performance with fiery jubilation, the audience at the Volksbühne passionately debated whether the tyrannicide represented in the play was just.

On November 4, 1989, the Berlin theater community organized a massive protest demonstration on East Berlin’s Alexanderplatz. (Other theater-inspired actions took place in Dresden, Frankfurt/Oder, Erfurt, Wittenberg, Rudolstadt, and Schwedt.) Like the Monday demonstrations occurring in Leipzig, this demonstration, where half a million emancipated people found their voices, sounded the death knell of the GDR. The ruling Party’s monstrous apparatus of power and repression collapsed on itself, and an important share of the credit belonged to theater people.

They now face, in reunified Germany, different and very difficult tasks. The need for theater must be defended against relentless efforts by city, state, and federal governments to save money. The structures of German theater are an object of debate. The question remains to be answered how (and whether) a theater committed to a comprehensive repertory schedule³ can be kept running without becoming commercialized. In Berlin, several theaters have closed, among them some very important ones with long and culturally obligating traditions. At this moment (October 1993), the abandonment of the West Berlin Freie Volksbühne (where Erwin Piscator worked from 1963 to 1966 and where Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* opened in 1963) is the latest of a series of closures that includes the East Berlin Theater im Palast [der Republik] (in the time of the GDR a lively contemporary theater under the leadership of Vera Oelschlegel), the West Berlin Schiller-Theater (which, under Artistic Director Boleslav Barlog, had seen productions by Beckett, and was the largest theater in either Germany), and its associated theaters, the Schloßpark-Theater and the Werkstatt des Schiller-Theaters. German theaters have long been unique in how they fulfilled their historical task of focusing on cultural creativity. This was true also in the GDR. That precedent should be enough to assure the future work of this theater tradition.

³ Theaters in the GDR maintained a revolving repertory of productions rather than engaging in long production runs. The high expense of such an arrangement, in terms of manpower and properties, will be obvious. (Ed.)

From Trial to Condemnation: The Debate over Brecht/Dessau's 1951 Opera *Lucullus*¹

Joachim Lucchesi

The controversy surrounding the 1951 Bertolt Brecht/Paul Dessau opera *The Trial of Lucullus* was typical as an example of the decision-making process in cultural matters in the early GDR, and decisive for subsequent cultural-political policy. The anti-war opera was a victim of the Soviet-directed campaign against modern trends in art, lumped together as "Formalism." Brecht and Dessau, committed both politically to the GDR and artistically to the 20th century avant-garde, agreed to revise their work to make it more politically acceptable. The incident illustrates the inadequacy of simple distinctions between "state art" and "opposition art." Historians of GDR culture and politics need to develop subtler categories and analyses before they can address present-day changes.

KEY WORDS: music, opera, *Lucullus*, Brecht, Dessau, Formalism

What does remain?² Regardless of how one poses this question—with resignation, transfigured sentimentality, sober criticism, or provocative scorn—it is the question most often heard in the gray zone of change between social systems. This holds especially for Germany, where, as Bertolt Brecht observed after his return from American exile, the cellars over which new houses were erected had never been cleaned out.

On March 17, 1951—eighteen months into the existence of the German Democratic Republic—a major artistic event took place and a cultural policy was born. As the Fifth Conference of the Central Committee of the SED drew to an end, Secretary for Art Questions Hans Lauter delivered a speech that would have far-

¹ Portions of this essay first appeared in German in the Forward to *Das Verhör in der Oper*. Thanks go to Dr. Michael Braz for his help with the translation of musical terms. (Ed.)

² The question alludes to the title of Christa Wolf's controversial post-Wall novel *Was bleibt* (1990). See Katrin Sieg's essay in this collection. (Ed.)

reaching effects on the cultural politics of the coming years. On the evening of the same day, an internationally observed event took place in the East Berlin State Opera: the world premiere of *The Trial of Lucullus* by Bertolt Brecht and Paul Dessau. Were it possible to focus the music history of this year to one burning point, the example of this opera would not be merely the prototype of the cultural political situation of the time. With its long and complicated production history, the opera is simultaneously embedded in a background of fascism, exile, Cold War, and the founding of the two German states.

Brecht was already in Swedish exile in 1939 when he began work on *Lucullus*, first conceiving of it as a radio play. Written at about the same time as Brecht's other anti-war play, *Mother Courage*, the play was a warning against impending historical catastrophe. With the circumspection of a writer fully conscious of his uncertain status as an exile, Brecht merely feigned an interest in the historical material he used for his plot. As was so often the case, his concerns were urgently contemporary, his recourse to history revealing itself as an anticipation of coming disasters. The rather mild depiction of the Roman gourmet and general Lucullus, the man who brought the cherry tree out of Asia, hardly masks the horrific carnage suffered by both conquerors and conquered. Moreover, Brecht desired a certain proximity to the German *triumphator* Adolf Hitler, a connoisseur not of fine food, but of Richard Wagner's operas. In his early drafts Brecht had in mind a tenor buffo for the role of Lucullus, hoping to evoke associations with Julius Lieban (*Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv*, 622/2), a currently famous Wagner soloist with the City Opera of Berlin-Charlottenburg. Yet as his own censor, Brecht feared that the radio play text had reached the limit of what could still be said. He would be proved right. A production for Swedish Radio (with music planned by composer Hilding Rosenberg) never took place: Brecht had obviously exceeded the pain threshold of the radio corporation. Swedish neutrality demanded consideration for German sensitivity.

As a stopgap, a troop of German emigré actors was enlisted to produce the rejected play. The concept was seductively equivocal: the radio play would be changed into a shadow play, with the shades of Hell who come forth as witnesses appearing literally as shadows. Brecht, however, who was adept at marketing his plays, was not satisfied with a marginal performance in Sweden. The first broadcast of the play (under the title *Lucullus in Court* and without music) took place on May 12, 1940, over Radio Beromünster in Switzerland. In the same year, the text was published in a German exile magazine printed in Moscow, *International Literature*, whose editor in chief, the writer Fritz Erpenbeck, would later be involved in the *Lucullus* debate.

The matter was not finished: in 1943, Brecht (who was living at the time in Santa Monica, California, among other exiled German artists) visited New York for the first time and met the Jewish composer Paul Dessau, himself an emigré from Berlin. Dessau, who was born in 1894 in Hamburg, remembers that Brecht read *Lucullus* to him in California: "What Brecht had in mind soon became clear: he really wanted to turn *Lucullus* into an opera. I worked a lot on the text of the radio play. There were of course many roles suited for a dramatic composition, but that we could make an opera out of it was not obvious to me for a long time. The topic dropped for a long time from our conversations" (Dessau, 1974:43).

Dessau's unfamiliarity with the requirements of Brechtian musical theater was probably another reason for the initial hesitation. Meanwhile, another bold idea of Brecht's never came to fruition: Dessau was to enlist Igor Stravinsky, who lived

nearby, to work on the project. Stravinsky declined for lack of time. Then in 1947, the American composer Roger Sessions brought the Brechtian text to a hardly noticed premiere at the University of California at Berkeley. The music is nowadays apparently lost, and Brecht was not involved in the staging. Alongside Sessions, who was musical director, Arthur Schnitzler's son Henry directed the play (Lucchesi & Shull, 1988:717).

A year later, after a degrading interrogation before the House Un-American Activities Committee (and with state sanctions against the opera *Lucullus* playing no secondary role), Brecht returned to Berlin. Events there had made the opera's content timely once more. Northwest German Radio in Hamburg signalled interest in a radio opera, but no contract was drawn up after Dessau's return to Berlin in 1948, and the project was finally abandoned. Nonetheless, Dessau's preoccupation with it led to the idea of "not plunging headlong into the complete apparatus for a *Lucullus* opera, but to think in terms of a small orchestral setting. This reflection led me directly into working on the music for a regular opera." A preliminary version of the music was finished by December 1949, and on the advice of Brecht's long-time friend, the stage director Caspar Neher, the opera was recommended for production by the German State Opera in East Berlin. With it began an opera debate that was singular in the history of postwar Germany. Many determining factors came together in one historical moment: the recent foundation of the two German states, the Cold War, the hot war in Korea, and the renewed discussion of artistic Formalism and Realism launched in the Soviet Union in 1948.

On February 13, 1950, German State Opera director Ernst Legal—associated with Brecht for twenty years as an actor and director—submitted the opera to the Ministry of National Education for review. The ministry, however, was not ready to give a quick reply. Three-and-a-half weeks later, Legal sent another letter concerning *Lucullus* to his superiors:

If a position is not taken in the shortest possible time, a modern work directed against war and the dangers of war will be lost to us.... Also, in my opinion, which is solely that of an art politician, I find that concerns are being raised in this connection where there really are none, or that the political consequences of a production are being overestimated while the independent thinking of the public and its right to be informed are underestimated. Of course it would never occur to me to recommend a work that runs counter to our state principles, or takes a hostile stance against our state character.—By the same token I am bound to take into consideration the interests of the German Democratic Republic, and to avoid any action that might cause our cultural policy to look from the outside like something other than a policy of intellectual freedom. (Lucchesi, 1993:28)

On April 18, a decision finally came from the ministry's Division of Art and Literature: the *Lucullus* opera was approved as part of the season schedule, but the contemporary ballet "Hamlet" by Boris Blacher and Tatjana Gsovsky, which had been proposed at the same time, would have to be refused in order "to avoid a concentration of problematic musical works" (Lucchesi, 1993:35).

Although official permission had now been granted, work on the stage production did not begin immediately. For one thing, a suitable director had to be found. Ernst Legal had initially favored conductor Egon Glückselig from Göttingen, but at the beginning of October 1950 he approached Swiss conductor Hermann Scherchen, a specialist in contemporary music. Scherchen accepted immediately. Dessau was

meanwhile working intensively on the score through the end of 1950. Only on January 15, 1951, could he report to Ernst Legal: "Yesterday evening the score was finally completed...and now we must magically combine the new modifications with the already existing piano parts" (Lucchesi, 1993:59). By this time (almost a year had passed since Ernst Legal submitted the libretto to the authorities), the cultural-political climate in the GDR had deteriorated markedly. In the daily newspaper *Tägliche Rundschau*, an organ of the Soviet military administration, a quasi-official article appeared on November 19, 1950, under the pseudonym "N. Orlow," viciously attacking the German State Opera:

It is time to deal with the State Opera in Berlin, and to impose order there. There must be an end to the rule of darkness in the State Opera in Berlin, to the mockery of the spectators, singers, and members of the orchestra by a handful of talentless mystics and Formalists who have crept into the leadership. There must be an end to the hopeless backwardness displayed by most of the productions. (Lucchesi, 1993:49)

At the beginning of 1948, a campaign had begun in Moscow (continuing a similar aesthetic debate from the thirties) against elements of so-called Formalism and Realism in music. Works by Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Muradeli were criticized as elitist and decadent, and were even banned in some cases. What is striking in this discussion is that the cultural-political label "Formalism" designated anything but a theoretically developed notion. Its very lack of sharpness and consequent loose application suited it as a vehicle for every possible basis of critical misgiving: confusion rooted in unfamiliarity with contemporary movements in art, convictions about the uselessness of a Modernism that had developed under capitalist conditions, fear of "cosmopolitan" takeover (particularly an American one), the "emptying" of the nascent socialist national culture—but also from simple reasons of personal resentment.

This Soviet campaign of "Zhdanovism" (named after its spokesman, Soviet Politburo member Andrey Zhdanov) spread to the GDR at the critical moment of its founding. While signs of a cultural policy reorientation on the Soviet model had been increasingly evident in the press since the end of the forties, the campaign was officially legitimized by the Fifth Conference of the Central Committee of the SED in March 1951. Prior to the conference, on January 26, Central Committee Secretary for Art Questions Hans Lauter had issued an internal directive to the Ministry of National Education: "The discussion in the area of music and the struggle against Formalism should begin shortly in the press" (Lucchesi, 1993:62).

It was predictable that in this increasingly tense cultural and political climate the Party and government authorities engaged with artistic proceedings would have to rethink the performance authorizations they had already issued. On December 28, 1950, the Ministry of National Education demanded a second look at the *Lucullus* score. Brecht reports in his work journal:

Morning talk with Dessau, the chorus rehearsals for *Lucullus* have already begun, but now the Ministry of National Education asks again for the score and Dessau would rather postpone the performance until the Fall. I am against it. The material is all the more important now that the American threats are so hysterical. (Hecht, 1974:570)

By "American threats," Brecht meant General Douglas MacArthur's announcement of the possible spread of the Korean War onto Chinese territory.

On March 12, 1951, the Secretariat of the General Committee of the SED came to a decision concerning the opera. Among others present were Walter Ulbricht, Franz Dahlem, Willi Stoph, and Hans Lauter. The minutes of the proceedings state:

The opera *The Trial of Lucullus* of Brecht/Dessau is not to be publicly presented, and is to be removed from the playing schedule. The Minister of National Education, Comrade Wandel, is asked to cancel the scheduled premiere immediately, and to see that this piece is not included on the schedule at all.... On March 13, after a rehearsal in the rooms of the State Opera, a discussion of the opera occurred, with distinguished comrades and artists as well as culture officials from the Berlin factories, FDJ [Free German Youth] officials, members of the Academy of Arts, the cultural associations, etc., taking part. (Lucchesi, 1993:82)

This discussion, held four days prior to the premiere and transcribed by a stenographer (see Lucchesi, 1993:101–122, also 82–101), belongs to the most important documents of the first major, internationally watched artistic debate of the early GDR. The transcript reveals how people were actually talking past each other, and the special tragedy of the situation was that it was not a question of pure antagonism. It was something much worse: both attackers and attacked were in the same boat and desired in good faith to make contributions to the founding of a new society. That this desire had in 1951 still not been frayed by constant criticism provides historical insight into that time. Brecht and Dessau were convinced that an emerging society needed art that was at the international forefront. But the problem was this: people who had engaged in the political struggles of the twenties, in the resistance, in the emigration, in the Spanish Civil War, who had gone to the anti-fascist schools in Moscow—these people worked now in the ministries and the art commissions. Culture functionaries whose views of art had been stamped by petty bourgeois and even philistine aesthetic models were now called upon to assess Dessau's unconventional music, and it was impossible for them to recognize in such music a new beginning. They nevertheless carried out their official duties with conviction, evaluating new artistic developments in the GDR and, when necessary, regulating them harshly.

The transcript of the March 13 meeting lists a decidedly heterogeneous assemblage of discussants. Besides Brecht, the meeting brought together Dessau, Helene Weigel, and Hermann Scherchen; also present were writer Fritz Erpenbeck (serving as discussion leader), along with composer Ernst Hermann Meyer, musicologist Harry Goldschmidt (a Swiss immigrant and student of Scherchen), music scholar Georg Knepler, writer Kurt Barthel (who published under the name KuBa), music critic Karl Laux, theater critic Herbert Ihering, musicologist Nathan Notowicz, Director of the German State Opera Ernst Legal, and Minister of National Education Paul Wandel, as well as representatives from the film studio DEFA, the Free German Youth (FDJ), and the League of Trade Unions (FDGB).

The minutes of the meeting illustrate the style of criticism that was typical of the time. It becomes clear in the course of the discussion that the complex connections between plot, language, scenic realization, and music were to be almost totally ignored. Brecht's libretto was hardly considered, questions of interpretation were discussed only marginally, questions of staging were not debated at all. Instead, the music—detached from everything else—was subjected to sharp criticism and even condemnation.

Isolated material elements of the music were taken from their theatrical contexts and criticized without regard to questions of relational meaning. Ernst Hermann Meyer, who opened the discussion with a citation from Stalin (stenographer Käthe Rülcke refrained from putting it down completely in the minutes), was critical of the accumulation of dissonant sevenths and seconds, the sharpness of the wind instrument chords, and the absence of melodic contour. Instead, because of disproportionate use of percussion instruments, the rhythm predominates, to the detriment of the melodic line and harmonic development (Lucchesi, 1993:102).

Nathan Notowicz, reflecting the restoration of Classical norms that was a part of Soviet aesthetics, also saw a disturbance of the balance among melody, harmony, and rhythm. Dessau, he claims, works with techniques of “destruction” that allow rhythm to “dwarf” melody and harmony. Notowicz felt that the composer had meant to use the unclassical disproportion of his musical material for progressive ends, but that “destruction” properly belongs to decadent imperialism (Lucchesi, 1993:108). The critic Karl Laux went so far as to speak of a “nonmusic” that for long stretches is mere “noise” that obscures the text; the dominance of rhythm compels the singer to stress words improperly; Dessau’s chosen method leads to the kind of muddle already seen in the 1945 opera *Antigone* by Carl Orff (a favorite example in anti-Formalist criticism) (Lucchesi, 1993:108–109).

Another line of attack focused on the charge that Dessau was a traditionalist, compositionally rooted in the past, resorting to tendencies current in European music after the First World War. How, Brecht must have wondered, can such obsolete musical thinking adequately address new social conditions? Did it not strike any of the critics that by drawing exclusively on classical models and standards in determining the aesthetic foundations of the new society’s art (which is how the theory of Socialist Realism originated) that one was going much farther back in history than the First World War? Brecht was not convinced in the least by such views: “When one treats only old music as exemplary, then one is using music that appears to have no conflict because the conflicts that it describes are no longer part of the today’s reality. How are we supposed to use these examples to bring the unresolved conflicts of our own time before our ears?” (Lucchesi, 1993:185). Brecht had in mind the contrast between the advanced, unconventional, emotionally distant music Dessau wrote for his opera text, and, for instance, the latest oratorios of Ernst Hermann Meyer, which he characterized in 1952 as a mixture of “fake sentimentality and artificial sweetness” [“Schmalzersatz und Kunsthonig”] (Hecht, 1974:590).

In the same vein, DEFA film director Wolfgang Schleif warned the opera’s critics against the increasingly narrow ideal of a “melodious popular music.” Fascism had ruined his ear for such music, he said, and he longed for “refreshing” rhythms and for music that is “ice cold.” He was, however, asking too much from this circle, and Käthe Rülcke noted the reaction as “laughter” (Lucchesi, 1993:105).

Hermann Scherchen, a friend of Paul Dessau, defended the opera passionately, but it was only with difficulty that he was kept from resigning on the spot as conductor and walking out in protest. He appealed to the greatness of Brecht’s poetry, which had inspired Dessau’s music. He characterized the whole discussion as “crazy nonsense” and urged the others to stop acting as though great art works were something “that can be eaten like a bowl of soup”—an observation that Dessau often made later in similar form (Lucchesi, 1993:118–119). Harry Goldschmidt also criticized the discussion for concentrating exclusively on Paul Dessau, and thereby

ignoring the high congruity between the text and the music. And this was indeed the most pertinent insight concerning the opera to come out of the morning's discussion: the music sets free the intellect in Brechtian fashion. Goldschmidt usefully proposed first to examine Brecht's text in order to be able to judge Dessau's music more precisely and more justly (Lucchesi, 1993:110).

And Dessau himself? As he told Hans Bunge seven years later in 1958, he was "dreadfully disappointed" (*Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv*, unnumbered: transcript of a recording made on 30 September 1958 at Zeuthen bei Berlin, p. 23). On March 13, 1952, he, like Brecht, had said little. His reply fluctuated between determination to set the record straight, bitter irony, and protective formality:

I thank you for this new and powerful demonstration of friendship. I will not talk about my work, you know it better, I cannot afford it. I wish to talk about something else: I feel like the hero in the opera of Brecht/Dessau. I have been accused of being out of touch. [...] As I came here to Berlin two years ago, I [...] immediately took up work alongside Brecht in the mass organizations etc. [...] It is not true that I hate the workers, but I do hate from the depth of my heart the bad taste of the masses. [...]! am not out of touch—I am out of touch with a small section of the populace, a small section. I feel at home in the German Democratic Republic like in no other land in the world." (Lucchesi, 1993:113)

In the end, according to Käthe Rülicke, the premiere of *Lucullus* was allowed to go forward so that the opera could be seen in its finished form. The performance was to be closed to the public, however—the tickets were distributed to "organizations, the FDJ, the police, the ministries, etc"—and no subsequent performances were anticipated (Lucchesi, 1993:200).

It was four days after this discussion, on the morning of March 17, that Hans Lauter sharply attacked the opera in remarks before the Fifth Conference of the Central Committee:

Can such a disharmonious music instill our people with a progressive spirit, with the will to engage themselves in the reconstruction, the fight for peace and a unified Germany? [...] No, such music and such a play cannot contribute to the growth of the German people toward answers to their vital questions. (Lucchesi, 1993:158)

After this denunciation of the newest development in GDR art as Formalism, novelist Arnold Zweig opened the discussion. It is not surprising that the Politburo censored the greater part of his speech in the 1952 publication of the proceedings, including the following sentence, in which Zweig protested against the closed premiere scheduled for that evening:

When you are offered a work by Bert Brecht, a work of indisputable greatness, the trial of General Lucullus, a symbolic representation of the execution of a warmonger, when you have the opportunity today to see the performance of such a work on the stage, you have no right, in my opinion, to exclude the public of the city of Berlin. (Lucchesi, 1993:168–169)

The extent to which the state's cultural-political pretensions had come into conflict with the self-image of the leftist avant-garde is shown by the recollections of journalist Dieter Borkowski. He was witness to an order that the then-chairman of the FDJ, Erich Honecker, gave a few hours before the opera premiere:

You have been called here because we are planning an action today that should teach a lesson to certain Formalists and parasites among our artists. [...] It is fatal when recognized artists, who already by 1933 were producing bourgeois art bound to