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Biography by Pericles Lewis The most influential playwright of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht was a conduit for the impact of German expressionism on later modern drama. Brecht's first play, *Baal*, written in 1918 but not produced until 1923, tells the story of a boorish and primitive poet who, from being a society sensation, degenerates into a rapist and murderer. The policeman who tries to arrest Baal summarizes his career as follows: "Started out as a cabaret performer and poet. Then merry-go-round owner, woodcutter, millionairess's lover, jailbird and pimp." Baal is at the same time a natural outgrowth and a parody of Strindberg's dream plays and the expressionist *Stationendrama* (See August Strindberg for a brief discussion of these plays). The play prefigures Brecht's later fascination with outcasts and social hypocrisy. In 1924, Brecht moved to Berlin, and soon thereafter began working with the communist director Erwin Piscator, who practiced a form of epic theater, in which he engaged contemporary social and political concerns. Brecht developed his own theory of the epic theater on the basis of his work with Piscator. Whereas Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov revised the notions of plot and character drawn from Aristotle, Brecht claimed to be creating an entirely non-Aristotelian theater, which he called epic rather than dramatic. This project entailed a wholesale reconsideration of plot, character, and many other elements of the traditional theater. The version of Aristotelian theater that Brecht was rejecting derived from the work of Goethe and Schiller, who saw epic and dramatic poetry as entirely distinct in type: the epic focused on the past and "man working outside himself," while the dramatic focused on the present and the "personally limited suffering" of the "inwardly directed man."<sup>[1]</sup> Brecht wanted theater to address the concerns that had traditionally been seen as epic: that is, history, in the dual sense of the pastness of the past and of the individual's engagement with social forces. Brecht's goal of creating an epic theater was closely linked to his political commitment to Marxism. Brecht became drawn to communism around 1926 and proclaimed himself a Marxist in 1928. In that same year, he had his first international success with *The Threepenny Opera*, an adaptation of the eighteenth-century Beggar's Opera by John Gay, which Brecht wrote in collaboration with Elisabeth Hauptmann, who co-wrote several of his early plays and after the war participated in his theatrical company, the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht set the opera in the criminal underworld of Victorian London; in it, he satirized the respectable bourgeoisie as no better than the gangster Macheath (*Mac the Knife*). Brecht intended the songs to distance the audience from the action, to "take up a position," but the music also arguably contributed to the humor and good fun of the play, which is Brecht's most popular but not his most politically effective. The use of music to distance the audience from the plot was an aspect of Brecht's theory of epic theater, which he contrasted with dramatic theater in the program notes for *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), another collaboration with Kurt Weill. The nineteen contrasts he outlined involve many of Aristotle's elements of the theater. Several are concerned with plot (converted in the epic theater into narrative or storytelling, and transformed from linear and evolutionary to discontinuous, like the earlier expressionist drama). Others are concerned with the competition between feeling and reason, and point to Brecht's suspicion of catharsis. Traditional notions of character are called into question because, as Brecht puts it, "the human being is the object of inquiry," and "he is alterable and able to alter." More radically, the method of portraying character in epic theater is quite different from that in the traditional theater. Many of Brecht's tenets involve the question of the spectator's relationship to the action on stage, and implicitly to the actors. Brecht discouraged identification or sympathy between the audience and the characters, which had been one of the primary goals of melodrama and of romantic theory and was implicit in Aristotle's notions of pity and catharsis. Instead of identifying with the characters on stage, Brecht wanted the spectator to maintain an intellectual distance from the action, to reason about it rather than just responding emotionally. In fact, Brecht wanted the spectator's experience to alternate between emotional reaction and distanced reflection upon that emotional reaction. The Greek word for actor is hypocrites, and there is a great deal of anxiety in modern drama about hypocrisy, the pretense to be someone other than who one really is. The theme is crucial to Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw, as well as to Brecht. Brecht's solution to the problem of the actor's potential hypocrisy was to insist that the actor must always be aware of, and make the audience aware of, the distance between actor and role. He thought of the actor as at once portraying a part and observing it from outside, thus allowing the audience to observe the part critically. In the mid-1930s, he called this the "alienation" or "estrangement" (*Verfremdung*) effect. The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic.<sup>[2]</sup> Theater historians have debated whether or not Brecht knew of Shklovsky's theory of "defamiliarization." At any rate, he shared with Shklovsky, and also with T. S. Eliot, the recognition that one of the functions of modern art is to make the familiar appear strange. Brecht became particularly interested in Chinese and Japanese acting traditions, which were not mimetic or naturalistic like western acting. Like Luigi Pirandello, he admired the use of masks as a means of calling attention to the artificiality of the stage. He defined each scene in terms of a dominant gesture, almost a tableau that would freeze action and allow it to be analyzed by the audience. Brecht used the term *gestus* to refer to the overall comportment of the actor on stage. He thus valued those aspects of the stage that the realist and naturalist tradition had attempted to eliminate. Brecht did not manage to make wholly successful plays in the style of the epic theater until later in his career, and critics have pointed out that even these rely heavily on plot and sympathy, despite Brecht's theoretical pronouncements. However, his theory of epic theater was a culmination of the experimental theater in the years immediately before and after the first world war. Although there is a great distance between the German expressionists and the later epic theater of Brecht, the epic theater owes something to the "death of character" already projected in Strindberg's dream plays. The movement away from stable character entailed an increasing psychological distance between the audience and the characters on stage; it broke with the illusion that characters in a play are real people and therefore defeated the earlier goal of identification between the audience members and the characters. This aspect of Brecht's accomplishment contributed to a broader re-evaluation of theatrical experience that had been undertaken over the previous generation, mainly in France and Italy.<sup>[3]</sup> <sup>[1]</sup> Goethe and Schiller, "Letters on Epic and Dramatic Poetry." <sup>[2]</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 92. <sup>[3]</sup> This page has been adapted from Pericles Lewis's *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 189-192. Bertolt Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany, on February 10, 1898. His study of philosophy and medicine at the University of Munich was interrupted by military service during WWI. After the war, he attended Artur Kutschner's theater seminar and wrote his first play, "*Baal*" (1918). In 1922, his first play to be performed, "*Drums in the Night*," opened in Munich and later at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Thereafter Brecht's plays began to be staged at many German theaters and, in 1924, he moved to Berlin. In 1927, Brecht and the composer Kurt Weill worked on the first of many collaborations, the "*Mahagonny*" song cycle. The following year, they produced "*The Threepenny Opera*," which became a Weimar-era theatrical sensation. Brecht also worked with composer Hanns Eisler – on "*The Measures Taken*" (1930) and, two years later, on the film production *Kuhle Wampe, oder Wem gehört die Welt?* Brecht fled Nazi Germany in 1933, first to Switzerland, then settling in Denmark for a short while, moved to Sweden in 1939, then to Finland, and finally arrived in the United States in 1941. There, he met many other German exiles, including Thomas Mann, Arnold Schönberg, Theodor Adorno, and Fritz Lang, who asked him to co-author the script for *Hangmen also Die*. Brecht wrote some of his most important plays in exile, including "*Galileo*" (1938), "*Mother Courage and Her Children*" (1939), "*The Good Person of Szechwan*" (1940), and "*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*" (1944). In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) interrogated Brecht and accused him of having communist sympathies. He left the United States for Switzerland and eventually moved to East Berlin in 1948, where he founded the Berliner Ensemble in 1949. The Berliner Ensemble performed "*Mother Courage and Her Children*" in Paris, during their first international tour in 1954; it was a sensation and catapulted Brecht into his position as one of the most important figures in 20th century theater. Bertolt Brecht died on August 14, 1956. Bibliography & More:

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