



MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN ON STAGE AND SCREEN

By Ralf Remshardt

A Tale of Two Wars

Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, written in 1939, occupies a privileged location in the history of modern theater. It is, without exaggeration, the essential play of the 20th century's signature playwright. Even before his return to Europe from American exile in 1947, Brecht wrote to his publisher, Peter Suhrkamp, that he considered *Mother Courage* the best example to demonstrate the "experimental character" of his plays.¹ We find here the quintessence of Brecht's dramaturgy, which had formed in the crucible of the 1920s on the Weimar stage and which, in anti-operas such as *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1927/31) and *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), had made him both famous and notorious beyond the borders of his home country. What is more, *Mother Courage* has the force of a challenge for his work, not only because Brecht considered the text one of his key achievements, but also because he extensively documented and glossed the first Berlin production with his Berliner Ensemble, which he co-directed with Erich Engel at the Deutsches Theater in 1949, and subsequent re-stagings at the Berliner Ensemble's building on Schiffbauerdamm after 1954.² These notes were published as a "model book" in 1958 as *Couragemodell*.³ Such was the influence of the text and its production even beyond Germany that the Berliner Ensemble's famous tours to France and England, in 1954 and 1956 respectively, are acknowledged by critics to have durably inflected the paths of those nations's theaters.⁴

In the early 1930s, Hitler's ascent forced the playwright to leave Germany to save his life, and by 1939 he found himself on the Swedish island of Lidingö, desperately charting the German military's invasion of Poland and fearing the same fate for his Scandinavian sanctuary. Brecht had previously confronted the Nazi menace with his loose scenic montage *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1934-8);⁵ he would later skewer the dictator's methods and mannerisms mercilessly in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941). But the imminent, and then realized threat of all-out war required a different dramatic strategy. Brecht had experienced the devastation of combat as a medic in World War I, a period that left him a committed Marxist and pacifist. He knew, however, that a play taking on this new war could not be grounded in the recent one; the physical and psychic wounds were too fresh. He needed to "historicize" this conflict, expose it as part of a repetitive structure of economically motivated violence, both historically contingent and trans-historically comprehensible; most importantly, he had to offer a perspective from below, portraying the struggle and suffering of ordinary people.

Like many of Brecht's plays, the sourcing of the story of camp-follower and peddler Anna Fierling, known as Mother Courage, is not derived in linear fashion from a precedent tale or prototype. Throughout his life, Brecht read and lived furiously, with wide-ranging appetites, processing literary impressions, a keen knowledge of history, remembered and revised personal experiences, and current news events into dramatic palimpsests.

An actress of Brecht's acquaintance, Naima Wifstrand, had read him a tale by a nineteenth-century Finnish-Swedish writer, Johan Ludvig Runeberg, about the sutler Lotta Svärd, a resilient figure in the mold of Mother Courage. His Swedish exile must have led Brecht to pair Svärd's character as a formidable survivor with his recollection of narratives of the Thirty Years War (1618-48), in which Swedish King Gustav Adolf had a leading role and which had devastated the German territories. A drawn-out conflict masking rapacity and territorial

¹ Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 7, 380. Hereafter cited as *Werke*. My translation throughout, except where noted.

² The first production, during the war, had been staged in neutral Switzerland in 1941 and was directed by Leopold Lindtberg. See below for details.

³ As David Barnett correctly points out, the 1949 production, though closely associated with the Berliner Ensemble in the popular and critical imagination, was technically completed before the Berliner Ensemble was formally founded. See Barnett, 41. Brecht's "model books" are illustrated documentations of his work, meant to be used by other directors when re-staging his plays.

⁴ See Thomson, 138.

⁵ In Eric Bentley's more familiar translation, *The Private Life of the Master Race*. The 27 scenes were begun in 1934, based on eyewitness and newspaper accounts, but not published in complete form until 1941. A first production took place in Paris in 1938.

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conquest in religious platitudes, this war had spawned the famous picaresque novels of Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, especially his *Simplicissimus* cycle (c. 1669), from which Brecht was able to borrow much of the descriptive coloring and detailing of *Mother Courage*. Grimmelshausen's novel *Trutz Simplex* even provided the name of the "arch-swindler and troublemaker Courasche," who shares with Brecht's character her promiscuity and her cheerful impudence, if little else.⁶

The first draft of the play, combining the 17th-century historical setting with a figure compositing Svärd and Courasche, was allegedly written in a fervid rush during a five-week period in the fall of 1939, underlining Brecht's urgency to respond to the unfolding cataclysm.⁷ Peter Thomson notes: "We cannot fairly assess the quality of *Mother Courage* if we remove the writing from its historical context. It is not merely an item in the ongoing catalog of world drama; it is an attempt to intervene in world history."⁸ But its warning intent was overtaken by unfolding events, and it had to wait until 1941 for its first performance in Zurich, under the direction of Leopold Lindtberg, and another eight years until Brecht's own direction could give it its full due.⁹

Mother Courage as Epic Theater

In 1950, Brecht wrote, "The theater of the new age was inaugurated when the covered wagon of Mother Courage rolled onto the stage of devastated Berlin."¹⁰ Indeed, that same year, the wagon—already an icon of the Berlin Ensemble's renewal of German theater after the production's great initial success—also rolled through the streets of East Berlin on the theater's float in the May Day parade. Brecht's daughter Barbara proudly rode atop it, to the delight of children who shouted, "Look, there's Mother Courage!" The Communist nomenklatura, with whom Brecht was never on the friendliest terms, thus gave their implicit imprimatur to this theater of the new age, though Otto Grotewohl, the GDR prime minister, had grumbled that Brecht's play was hardly art.¹¹

As a drama, *Mother Courage* always sat uncomfortably between its position as the eminent example of anti-capitalist, anti-war epic theater and the unfulfilled claims made on it by the proponents of socialist realism, for whom the central character was not heroically proletarian enough (indeed, she is inconveniently *petit-bourgeois* in her attitudes). Moreover, for some on both sides, the play was an insufficient response to the ideological melodrama that was evolving into the Cold War, thus giving audiences in both East and West headaches.¹² How was one to understand its tangled, discontinuous story? What to think of its plucky but compromised heroine? The play is by no means an exemplar of the clean didacticism for which Brecht is unfairly notorious. As playwright Tony Kushner, one of Brecht's most ardent admirers (and adapters), has noted, "Clarity is intended, but the confusion is no accident. What Courage shows us will escape our judgment—but it remains infinitely available to our struggles to understand."¹³

Technically, the play's subtitle—*A Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War*—claims that the drama is aligned with the "chronicle" form, a loose stringing-together of related but not necessarily causally-linked incidents, each somehow remarkable and significant. But Brecht instantly upends the expectation of a history play in the Elizabethan mold, where "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" and great men fall by great deeds.¹⁴ The fable—Brecht's term for the plot and plotting of his plays—commences mid-war with Mother Courage pursuing

⁶ See Thomson, 5-7.

⁷ The timeline is muddled, and documentation is contradictory. Knopf (181-2) doubts the narrative and notes that Brecht himself, albeit later, put the date of composition in 1938, which would mean that he anticipated the war rather than reacting to it.

⁸ Thomson, 12.

⁹ Brecht's co-director for this first German production was Erich Engel, who also directed the famous 1928 *The Threepenny Opera*.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Pintzka, 9.

¹¹ Thomson, 64.

¹² On this point, see the analysis of Robert Leach who reads *Mother Courage* as a "lasting riposte" to the complaints of the chief critical enforcer of socialist realism, Georg Lukács. (Leach, 130).

¹³ Kushner.

¹⁴ Citation from William Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*, III.i. The second reference is to Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (*On the Fall of Famous Men*), which gave rise to the "de casibus tragedies" of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, among others.

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the Swedish army, and when it concludes, “the war is nowhere near over.”¹⁵ Crowned heads and their surrogates bestride another, distant stage, as remote figures whose quite scrutable actions the play’s lower-class characters observe from afar with wary skepticism.

Avoiding the Aristotelian model of climactic action, *Mother Courage* is a simple play of infinite complexity, “one thing after another” rather than “one thing out of another.”¹⁶ History in Brecht’s telling appears as a bad system imposing a sequence of potentially bad choices, and Mother Courage makes them all, beginning with her conviction that “war is nothing but business/and instead of with cheese it’s with lead.”¹⁷ Every catastrophe, as the play shows us insistently and repeatedly, springs from that initial error in judgment. All of her children are lost while she tries to strike a bargain, though only in the case of Swiss Cheese is the bargain the proximate cause of his demise. In his *Poetics* Aristotle has a term for such errors of judgment that bring about the tragic hero’s downfall—*hamartia*. For Brecht, however, tragedy is inadmissible because errors are correctable. Yet Mother Courage can’t, or won’t correct hers; by the end, wearily pulling her cart to catch up with the departing troops, she’s in too deep. In business parlance, she has surrendered to the “sunk cost fallacy,” whereby turning back would be as intolerable as continuing to do the wrong thing.

Brecht intended the drama as one of social instruction, but the operative dialectic is that the audience learns something precisely because Mother Courage learns nothing. In the 1949 production, his careful plotting was manifested in meticulously crafted *Grundarrangements* (basic arrangements), in which every scene’s paradox and contradiction found embodied form. Mother Courage’s wagon, the dual symbol of her modest livelihood and her encumbrance with all-consuming commerce, was usually where the vectors of the stage action converged. These basic arrangements guaranteed that the essential function of each scene could be easily apprehended and remained legible to the audience even when the action is swift and frantic—as in Scene 11, when Mother Courage’s daughter, mute Kattrin, drums the city of Halle awake at the cost of her life. That scene, incidentally, is also the one that most troubled Brecht, because its lessons—that Kattrin pays the unwilling price of the cowardice of the peasants, that her sacrifice is less eternally noble than situationally necessary, and that she is both heroic *and* terrified—were always subsumed by a kind of theatrical excess. Audiences identified with the injured, frightened creature and responded with empathy, whatever the didactic intention. As a corrective, Brecht offered an extra dose of *Verfremdung* in the scene by making the peasants loathsome in their self-justifying cant and the soldiers farcically incompetent.

The forbidding-sounding Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung*—often translated misleadingly as “alienation,” as if the playwright had some hostile intent toward his audience—is present in *Mother Courage* in multiple registers of what Brecht liked to call the theatrical “apparatus.”¹⁸ *Verfremdung*—literally, “making strange”—is in truth a simple concept that applies to removing “what is self-evident, familiar, obvious in order to produce wonder and curiosity,” as Brecht wrote in 1939.¹⁹ So it is an *epistemological* process used as an artistic method, and its principal tool is interruption. “Historicizing” the war interrupts any easy analogy between present and past. Scene titles (projections or voice-overs), commenting songs and music, split scenes, discontinuities and jolts in the fable all act as interruptions of an easy consumption of the drama. Most crucially, the actors’ presentation of their characters as a series of attitudes and behaviors interrupts identification and empathy, both on stage and in the house.

When Brecht wants to show us Mother Courage “at her worst,” he doesn’t choose a scene in which she commits an act of criminal neglect or overt greed. Rather, it is a seemingly minor scene in which she dissuades a hot-headed young soldier from complaining to his superior. Here, Courage’s “Song of the Great Capitulation” interrupts the soldier’s rebellion, just as the song’s meaning interrupts the illusion that short-term anger can make

¹⁵ *Werke* 5, 79.

¹⁶ Thomson, 25.

¹⁷ *Werke* 5, 61.

¹⁸ See, for example, Brecht 2015, 70–80.

¹⁹ Brecht 2015, 167.

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long-term differences in the world. (If one were to search the play for any moment that spells out the kind of compliance that made Nazism possible, here it is.) And yet, as Brecht also tells us (effectively interrupting our own assumption of Mother Courage's depravity), that "it is not the evilness of her persona, but of her class" that is on display here and that she herself shows "a glimpse of wisdom and even of nobility."²⁰

The duality and duplicity of language is one of the most-underestimated strategies of characterization in Brecht's epic style. There are exchanges that have the true spark of comic writing, a kind of dialectical humor that illuminates the drama's serious aspects all the more powerfully by contrast. If Brecht, especially in his later writings, speaks of the necessity for entertainment, for theatrical pleasure, this is what he means. While General Tilly is buried with pomp offstage,²¹ Mother Courage dryly comments on his accidental heroism while counting her inventory of socks. In Scene 3, the Cook, reprimanded by the Chaplain for his irreverence towards the Swedish king, whose bread he eats, shoots back, "I don't eat his bread, I bake it."²² While some characters display this kind of pragmatic wit and canny irony towards the powerful, others are unwittingly comical by flaunting a grotesquely false consciousness, like the irreligious Chaplain or the blunt recruiting officer, who praises the war as a great instrument for keeping order. These moments of verbal inversion are one of the play's most preeminent instruments of revelation—a "making strange" of clichéd or habitual viewpoints.

Mother Courage herself is the most acutely alert character on the stage, and often the funniest, skewering all the tired tropes of self-justification that sustain the war. Debating with the Cook, she remarks that wherever great virtue is demanded, something in the system is "rotten;" in a just country, she continues, "we could all be entirely ordinary, passably smart, and cowards, as far as I'm concerned."²³ And yet, it turns out that exactly such great virtues, born of the war that is her sustenance—Eilif's inopportune bravery, Swiss Cheese's stubborn loyalty, Katrin's desperate humanity—are what destroy her family and leave her bereft. The play's overriding irony, its greatest *Verfremdungseffekt*, is that Mother Courage's brilliant, caustic understanding is not sufficient to forestall her suffering, because her actions remain hitched to the war as she remains hitched to her wagon.

Reception and Adaptations

The figure of Mother Courage is continually denounced, not merely by other characters in the play (the Chaplain calls her a "hyena of the battlefield"), but by the play itself; and yet that blunt assessment is counterbalanced by the richness of Brecht's characterization. The post-war German audience, having suffered and looking for validation of their suffering, saw in her less the heartless speculator than the tormented mother. Brecht shuddered when a critic of the 1941 Zurich production compared her to the Greek tragic heroine Niobe. In subsequent criticism, too, the figure of Courage was subjected to a fairly unfruitful opposition of claims from, on the one hand, bourgeois writers who relished the tragic substance of her unbending nature (ignoring her obtuseness and pettiness), and on the other, leftist critics who saw a sharp, ideologically vivid iteration of false consciousness (ignoring her desperate humanity). But, decades later, the abatement of the Cold War and the not-quite "End of History" (in Francis Fukuyama's familiar phrase²⁴) have brought about a more leavened and, dare we say, postmodern view of *Mother Courage*, especially from Anglo-American thinkers. Tellingly, the rather recondite choice of placing the action in an all-but-unknown war has made African American authors eager to give *Mother Courage* a more contemporary vernacular: Ntozake Shange adapted Brecht's script in 1979 for New York's Public Theater by resituating it in the US Civil War and Lynn Nottage won a Pulitzer Prize for *Ruined* (2009), her loose homage to *Mother Courage* set in war-torn present-day Congo.

²⁰ Berliner Ensemble, 236.

²¹ This is one of the few moments where the 1960 film deviates from the theater model by showing Tilly's funeral cortege in the background while a drunken soldier gives an ironic salute in the foreground. See Lang, 241.

²² Brecht, *Werke* 5, 31.

²³ *Werke* 5, 23.

²⁴ Frances Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

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The playwrights David Hare (UK) and Tony Kushner (USA), with their respective translations/adaptations in the 1990s and 2000s, have made attempts at a kind of pragmatic reclamation of *Mother Courage* in a context where history is no longer thought of as merely fungible. For Hare, whose adaptation was commissioned by the Royal National Theatre in London in 1995 (with Diana Rigg), asking whether the central character is admirable or despicable is “the worst possible way of approaching the play.” To him, “it scarcely matters what way you choose to behave in a war,” and with a playwright’s ear, he notices that as her cleverness turns into a “perverse kind of craziness” she says less and less. Her ironic loquacity is extinguished, and the play becomes a drama of the inexpressibility of the incompatible gulf between self and world. “If I were to propose an alternative title for the play,” Hare writes, “it would be ‘The Silencing of Mother Courage.’”²⁵ Similarly, for Kushner, Brecht fails in his most earnest intentions to have the audience condemn the character because he leaves her no valid choices. Mother Courage, says Kushner, “embodies an uncomfortably familiar modern disfigurement: a relationship to commodities, money and the marketplace that perverts human relationships and is ultimately inimical to life.” If the play’s formal qualities militate for a critical stance, he adds, the historical constraints imposed on her “force us out of judgment and into empathy.”²⁶ Even a latter-day Marxist critic such as Fredric Jameson removes the sting of personal denunciation and lapses into empathy when he concedes that “it is life itself and History which passes the judgment and abandons her to the hollow business of a lonely old age.”²⁷

Helene Weigel Takes the Stage

Any actress attempting to play the lead role in *Mother Courage* needs to reckon with Helene Weigel’s epochal performance, perhaps even be a little intimidated by it. Stars such as Diana Rigg, Judi Dench and Meryl Streep have played the role in English; of the latter, a critic wrote that it was “the greatest piece of miscasting you’ll ever have the good fortune to see,” noting that Streep’s “natural radiance” undermined the presentation.²⁸ But Weigel *became* a star playing Mother Courage, partly by never *being* one. The writer Anna Seghers remarked that she “acted as if she had no audience”—meaning she did not cater to outside perceptions.²⁹

Weigel’s rendering of the character is indissolubly connected with the literary status of the text, and it was doubtless as much to capture her singular performance as to give exposure to the play itself that DEFA made the decision to create the film in 1960, eleven years after the play’s debut in Berlin. Weigel was not the first Mother Courage—that distinction belongs to Therese Giehse, a German-Jewish actress whose nimble comic sensibility gave the role its first shape in the inaugural Zurich production in 1941, while the war still raged. Brecht himself contrasted the two versions in 1951. Giehse, he remarked, allowed the audience the odd pleasure of enjoying the “triumph in the indestructibility of a person full of vitality who is afflicted by the turbulence of the war.” In Weigel’s performance, conversely, there was no concession to such pleasures, which belong to the Aristotelian, the bourgeois, the culinary theater (all terms of opprobrium to Brecht); here, the “merchant mother became a great living contradiction, which disfigured and deformed her to the point of unrecognizability.”³⁰ Weigel’s interpretation did not only deliver a deeply empathic (though *not* empathetic) representation of this contradictory figure; it also gave us a succession of indelible theatrical moments, through which her performance acquired the standing of a prototype. (The only comparably close association between an actor and a role in the 20th century may be Marlon Brando’s Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1951.)

As the production took shape in Berlin in 1948, Weigel became no doubt as much an inventor of the figure of Mother Courage as Brecht himself. The rehearsals, chronicled in the compendium *Couragemodell*, were

²⁵ Hare, viii-ix.

²⁶ Kushner.

²⁷ Jameson, 119

²⁸ McCarter.

²⁹ Berliner Ensemble, 266.

³⁰ Brecht 2015, 352-3. However, Therese Giehse played the role many more times, including in Munich under Brecht’s own direction in 1950, and Brecht is known to have prized it. Brecht is referring more to the critical reception of Giehse’s performance, which dismayed him, than to its quality.

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opportunities for discovery, revision, and testing of theatrical hypotheses, the first real laboratory of the mature epic style. This began with Weigel's appearance.

When we first encounter her, perched insouciantly on her wagon—as on a chariot in an ironic evocation of the dubious heroism that is the source of her sobriquet—she is singing a rousing hymn to the resurrection of the war and the resumption of her business affairs.

This *Mother Courage* is simultaneously shrewd and earthy, but with an earthiness that is decidedly unfolkloric and unsentimental. It is rooted in a Southern German/Austrian mode of speech that, despite being native to Weigel, is not a naturalistic choice—Brecht would have objected to mere mimesis—but rather a heightened, quite artificial device. In fact, the way Weigel deploys it, dialect is itself dialectical. Note how, in confronting the recruiting officer in the first scene, she calculatingly drops into a folksy cant to dissuade him from targeting her sons. Her costume, apparently inspired by the paintings of Pieter Breughel that Brecht so admired, is a kind of carapace, a layered covering both protective and concealing, from which a knife might emerge in a flash, or into which a coin might disappear. Weigel's handsome, bony, aquiline face is rendered increasingly skull-like. Though she shows flickers of pleasure in sexual banter, always to get her way, the actress also has the courage of ugliness. To the character, this would be essential: Courage recognizes—as she instructs Kattrin while dirtying her face in Scene 3—that it is a necessary defense in a world where rape is a daily threat.

Brecht's characters, unlike Konstantin Stanislavski's, are constructed not from inner psychological impulse but from social behavior. For the materialist Brecht, consciousness was always subordinate to context. Both Brecht's directing and Weigel's congenial acting were concerned with the detailed revelation of such circumstances. Accordingly, Brecht might take many hours with his actors to explore and shape a particular movement, phrasing, or exchange. In watching Weigel, it is important to notice not only what she does, but *how* she does it. Brecht used the term *Gestus*, or *gest*, to describe a condensed and immediately comprehensible demonstration of instances of observed and reproduced behavior that reveal the character's social contradictions. Each scene has a basic *gest* and a series of smaller *gests* that inform it; all are grounded in the most primary *gest*, that of "showing." In the ethos of Brecht's theater, clarity of showing is the actor's manifest duty to the audience.

Weigel is masterful at discovering and embodying these *gests*. Take for instance the moment when she pulls a knife from her pocket and orders the recruiters to back off and stop abducting her son. Though she vows, "I will cut you up, you scoundrels!", the threat is not made in heat or true anger and the gesture is smooth, almost routine. *Mother Courage's* response to danger is routine rather than impulsive. Her warning, like most of her interactions with others, is transactional: another necessary part of surviving in wartime. Even adversarial relationships, the brief moment suggests, are ritualized and rest on mutual understanding. In the model book, it is noted that the gesture contains "no wildness. The woman merely shows that she will go only so far in the defense of her children."³¹ Attention to the overlooked details of human behavior, which nevertheless speak volumes about the character's social condition, are a hallmark of Weigel's meticulous performance. In the same scene, the payment for the belt buckle—which a less alert actor might treat as a throwaway moment—becomes a disclosure of Courage's relationship with money. Note the manner in which she bites the sergeant's coin while fixing him with her gaze: greed, mistrust, and finally deference to authority appear in succession. Coin verified and pocketed, the audible snapping shut of her purse signals the end of the deal. This physical punctuation is repeated as a motif until the end of the play, when she pockets her last coin before doggedly continuing her journey.

In the dialectic of Brecht's performance, what the character could or should, but *doesn't* do is of equal importance, a technique for which he coined the accurate if somewhat cumbersome term "fixing the *not-but*." In his words, performers should "act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible . . ."³² Weigel's performance is shot through with such moments where the choice *not* made, the decision *not* taken, hovers over

³¹ Berliner Ensemble, 232.

³² Brecht 2015, 213.

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the explicit action in stark relief. When she recognizes her son Eilif's voice in the General's tent, she stands rooted to the ground in a split scene, as he does his sword dance inside. If the audience wonders why she does not rush to embrace her son as might be expected, it is because his presence has just conferred an advantage in her culinary negotiations with the Cook, and she has business to finish before she can let herself revert to motherhood. The embrace is preceded by a punitive slap for Eilif who has been too recklessly "brave."

The most notable instance of Weigel's understated virtuosity appears in Scene 3. As her son Swiss Cheese has been captured and is being tortured and threatened with execution to obtain the hiding place of the regimental cash box, Courage has sent Yvette as her emissary to negotiate a release. But the bribe of 150 guilders is too little, and now Courage is caught between envisaging her financial ruin and losing her son, both intolerable outcomes. Finally, she relents and offers 200, her total net worth. (Brecht makes it clear, in an earlier aside to Katrin, that this is not a spontaneous decision; Courage is prepared to give all if necessary, just not right away.) As Yvette hurries away for a last attempt, Weigel, as Courage, rises from her stool, abandoning the stoic polishing of knives that had been her occupation, and intones: "I believe I've haggled too long."³³ This is *anagnorisis* (recognition) without *pathos*, in the terms of Greek tragedy, and the *catastrophe* follows imminently. She wavers stiffly and sinks back onto the stool with a mask-like impassive face as a drumroll announces the impending execution. When the shots echo, her body convulses slightly, and she throws her head back with eyes closed and mouth agape in a black chasm, her hands knotted in her lap.

But note what she does *not* do: scream. Were she to do so, she would endanger herself. This is a perfect embodiment of the violent contradictions between her maternal feelings, her economic interests, and her survival. The moment so impressed the literary critic George Steiner that he called it "raw and terrible beyond any description."³⁴ This "silent scream" is indeed the only overt display of emotion she permits herself; in the next instant, when asked to identify her son's body, she has recomposed herself into an obstinate, almost dull resignation, her clenched jaw jutting out defiantly. She denies him. Here, Brecht remarks, "Weigel's audacity in the renunciation of the character reached its pinnacle."³⁵ But the word I have translated as "renunciation" (*Preisgabe*) can also mean "disclosure" – and so, Weigel's refusal to court sentiment, melodrama, or indeed even tragedy results in her clearest moment of "showing."

The "silent scream" is iconic in the modern theater, commemorated in a famous, starkly black-and-white photograph from the *Modellbuch*, and its iconic status is underlined by the fact that it was itself inspired by a newspaper image of a suffering woman in Singapore that Weigel had seen. It etches into the mind not just the agony of war victims, but specifically of *women* in war. It is no wonder Weigel chose it to illustrate how her motherhood is put to the most ruthless test, a test she fails. Remarkably, this moment had to be discovered in practice and was added only in later performances; and, once discovered, it needed to be managed, lest it give rise to mere empathy. It is instructive to look at the same scene in the two extant recordings from 1957 and 1961, which I discuss below. There is an intensity in Weigel's 1957 silent scream that is missing from the later film. In the latter, the gest is demonstrated more than enacted, in keeping with Brecht's insistence in his 1938 essay "The Street Scene" that the demonstrator's (i.e., actor's) "performance is essentially repetitive. The event has taken place: what you are seeing now is a repeat."³⁶

Stage to Screen

A film, by its very nature, is also a repeat of a performance, and Brecht was always drawn to the cinematic medium as a tool for his expression. He tried, throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s, to get a film version of *Mother Courage* off the ground, but his efforts came to naught. The project lurched through several false starts,

³³ *Werke* 5, 45.

³⁴ Steiner, 354.

³⁵ Berliner Ensemble, 262.

³⁶ Brecht 2015, 204-5

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buffeted between opposing forces. The DEFA Studios desired to launch a high-profile international film project; at one time, for example, Anna Magnani was mentioned for the role of Yvette and Luchino Visconti as a director. Brecht, meanwhile, insisted on protecting the integrity of the material from party propagandists who felt it was too “pacifistic.” And, finally, uncongenial collaborators, like the brilliant but aesthetically and temperamentally contrary director Wolfgang Staudte, contributed other problems. From his extant notes, it is evident that Brecht was inclined to put *Mother Courage’s* intractability into starker relief and set up Katrin against her as a positive role model. Preliminary conversations and screenplay drafts also point to an expanded, more filmic narrative that would illustrate Courage’s social roots—in one version, she is an innkeeper and smallholder in a Baltic village before setting out with her wagon—and could show the war in the kind of graphic and atmospheric detail that was both inconceivable and undesirable on stage. Shooting commenced in summer 1955 but stopped with little more than a quarter of the film shot. To Brecht’s chagrin, the film was conceived as a wide-screen, large-scale costume drama in color with foreign stars such as Simone Signoret (playing Yvette). Brecht’s untimely death in 1956 struck a final blow to the project, and the footage was lost.³⁷

There are two “official” film versions of *Mother Courage* available today, both more or less faithful records of the stage production, of which only the DEFA film is now in circulation. The first filmed version is a fairly static recording of the second (1951) stage production, filmed as an archival record for the Berliner Ensemble in 1957. In contrast to the DEFA film, this version was shot with a live audience present and makes up in visceral power what it lacks in technical polish.³⁸ Manfred Wekwerth and Peter Palitzsch, the directors of the 1960 film, had both been assistants to Brecht during the heady days of the Ensemble’s founding and flourishing, and kept an (albeit contentious) guard over his legacy. Though the two had a falling-out only a short time later, and Palitzsch emigrated from the GDR to pursue his directing career in West Germany, the film seems calculated to demonstrate artistic unity and show deference to the now-classic production.

The DEFA production ended up being a hybrid of theater and film, not necessarily to its detriment. Although West German critic Ulrich Gregor justifiably called it an “aesthetically peculiar entity,”³⁹ the film manages to preserve the texture of the legendary production and much of the immediacy of key original performances by Helene Weigel and Angelika Hurwicz (Katrin). It also featured Ernst Busch (replacing Paul Bildt, who played in the Berliner Ensemble production) as the Cook; Wolf Kaiser (replacing Erwin Geschonneck) as the Chaplain; and Brecht’s son-in-law, Ekkehard Schall, as Eilif. Where concessions were made to the cinematic medium, they appear very deliberate, if not always successful. The scene titles now have the sonorous, authoritative voice-over quality recognizable from DEFA documentaries, and contemporary etchings by Jacques Callot of the Thirty Years’ War divide the scenes, underlining the “chronicle” approach. There are some incongruously naturalistic choices, such as Busch lapsing into near-Dutch (the character of the Cook is from Utrecht), even though no Swede attempts Swedish.

Though many of the “basic arrangements” that Bertolt Brecht and Erich Engel carefully created in their 1949 *mise-en-scène* remain, the set is quite apparently a studio space. The revolving stage at the beginning and end has given way to depth of field, though in keeping with Brecht’s insistence that the theater *apparatus* remain visible, the forced perspective and the scarcity of visual detail call attention to themselves. The bright wash of lighting derives from the theater; and unlike the aborted 1955 film, which was to have been in color, this version sensibly retains the muted palette of the stage by choosing to use black-and-white film. Cinema thus becomes a medium of demonstration, not of photographic realism. One thing that is lost in the film version is the visual metaphor of *Mother Courage’s* circular progress, which mirrors her circular logic. The wagon, the most potent symbol of *Mother Courage’s* illusion of self-sufficiency, surrenders its theatrical centrality and becomes an object among many.

³⁷ For a detailed recounting of the project, see Gersch, 268-93 and Lang, 228-235.

³⁸ The copy is usually inaccessible, but the Berliner Ensemble—responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, when live performance was curtailed or closed down—made this archival recording available for a month in May of 2020 via streaming on their website. Lang (2006) does not mention this recording in his book.

³⁹ Qtd. in Gersch 300.

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Admitting to cinematic necessity, Wekwerth and Palitzsch resolve scenes into close-up, medium and wide shots. Instances in which the play envisions two simultaneous, co-present actions commenting on each other are shown, some in widescreen (emulating the stage), some framed as a split screen, some broken into parallel edits. Rarely, a gest—for instance, the testing and pocketing of the coin—may be emphasized with a camera pan. On occasion—notably at the end of the “silent scream” sequence—theatrically continuous actions are subjected to fade-outs that conventionally indicate passage of time. Certain moments are isolated starkly by a black wipe in a visual simulacrum of “showing.” Whether all of these filmic devices enhance or disrupt the effects of epic theater is up for debate. As Wolfgang Gersch has noted, the actors largely persist in a theatrical, audience-directed mode of performance while the camera roams.⁴⁰ Brecht’s theater demands a kind of fixed (though ultimately flexible) point of view from which the audience is to judge characters and action – a standpoint. It is a legitimate question whether the camera in closeup – for instance registering Mother Courage’s pained denial of Swiss Cheese – doesn’t become an instrument for empathy at odds with Brecht’s intentions. Do certain shots trigger an irrefutable sense of pathos? For example, the shot in scene 10 through the farmhouse window onto the frigid figures of Mother Courage and Katrin, or the one at the end that shows us Mother Courage gathering the reins from inside the denuded wagon. These are moments where contextual framing carries an emotional tenor. Even when he was still alive and working on the screenplay for the abortive first version of the film, Brecht was keenly aware that filming his work presented a nearly intractable problem, and the DEFA film testifies to that.

The West German *Wiederbewaffnung* (military rearmament) that began in earnest in the mid-1950s as a means of binding the country to the US-led security structure caused enormous alarm in Moscow and East Berlin. The making of an anti-war film which associated military aggression with unfettered capitalism and warned of consequences for a docile or compliant population was not coincidental in 1960, though it must be doubted whether the film was (or meant to be) effective as propaganda. Neither could it provide much succor for the GDR’s most pressing problem of the time, the mass emigration to the West, which was cresting to a postwar high of 3.5 million. Perhaps the East German government would argue that these refugees were, like Mother Courage, just following their blind economic fortunes against their better judgment; in any event, art would not persuade them to stay.⁴¹ Half a year after the film’s release in 1961, a wall cleaved Berlin in two.

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⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ In 1961, Wekwerth co-authored a play named *Frau Flinz* with Helmut Baierl, a kind of “*Mother Courage* in reverse” which hewed close to the party line by showing a woman who “loses” her children to GDR socialism before gaining them back. It was clearly meant to accomplish the kind of propaganda work that Brecht’s play could not by making the case for the system. (See Barnett, 169).

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