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Peer reviewed

A History of the Berliner Ensemble. By David Barnett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2015. Pp. xvi + 507. Cloth \$135. ISBN 978-1-107-05979-5.

David Barnett's historical survey of the Berliner Ensemble, the first comprehensive study of the theater company, comes amid a number of publications and republication of texts by and about Bertolt Brecht in English, including Stephan Parker's impressive *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* and the expanded and revised edition of *Brecht on Theatre*, edited by Steve Giles, Marc Silberman, and Tom Kuhn, as well as Barnett's own *Brecht in Practice*. The narrative arc of *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* is perhaps not unexpected, given the many stories, rumors, and legends that float around the Berliner Ensemble and those who were involved with it, but Barnett's account is unique in its scope and makes good use of a diverse set of archives and interviews. This comprehensive research allows Barnett to intervene into many of the discrepancies that still surround accounts of the key controversies and struggles around the Berliner Ensemble, from the machinations of key players like Manfred Wekwerth and Barbara Brecht-Schall to the maneuvers of Wekwerth and the *Stasi* to stage Volker Braun's *The Great Peace* at the BE in 1979. Barnett also provides excellent accounts of the BE's responses to the critical moments of East Germany's brief history and to the *Wende*.

The book begins with a chapter detailing Brecht's own practice at the Ensemble. What emerges in this chapter is that work at the Berliner Ensemble was inductive, collaborative, and all encompassing. Rather than beginning rehearsals with a fixed vision of a play, Brecht encouraged actors to "make offers" of their interpretation of their roles and how these roles related to the over-all "*Fabel*," Brecht's term for the guiding

contradictions structuring a given drama. The *Fabel*, though, as Barnett points out, is not something readily available in a play, but must be arrived out through a long process of collaboration, or *Mitbestimmung*. “Brecht’s war on the individual visionary,” Barnett writes, “was based in the collective process he cultivated: an ensemble pooled its member’s many and varied experiences as a means of generating realistic material, ratified by the group, rather than fanciful singular speculation.” (11) This collective process was famously documented in the *Notate* and *Modellbücher* produced by Brecht’s assistants. In general, Brecht cultivated a theater that was both flexible and precise. Noting that most accounts of term “Brechtian,” elide the question of the political, Barnett is emphatic (here following Fredric Jameson in his *Brecht and Method*) that Brecht’s theater be thought of as a method, and not a style or an array of effects and techniques. “Brechtian theater,” Barnett argues, “is thus one concerned with placing dialectics at the heart of its analysis, its rehearsals, and its productions” (38).

Dialectics, then, distinguish political theater, which attempts to convey an already formulated message, from “making theater politically” (62). This distinction is also important to understanding the complicated relationship of Brecht and the BE to the cultural politics of the early German Democratic Republic. On the one hand, the Berliner Ensemble was part of the GDR state apparatus and quickly became the GDR’s flagship theater. On the other hand, Brecht often found himself and his associates targeted in the tense atmosphere of the cultural campaigns of the 1950s. While Brecht shared many of the fundamental assumptions guiding the cultural policy of the SED in these years, Barnett points out, “... he was always concerned with process and activity, while the SED anchored socialist realism’s tenets in specific approved and consequently static

forms” (120). After Brecht’s death, his own method stood in danger of congealing into approved and static forms, and already by the mid-1960s, the BE was being described by some as a “Brecht Museum.” In many ways, the history that Barnett tells is one of the struggle over Brecht’s legacy between those who stood in one way or another for the preservation, or *Pflege*, of a sort of orthodox Brechtianism and those who sought to find forms for a theater that Barnett characterizes as post-Brechtian, “...in that it seeks to preserve a commitment to dialectics while finding new means to supplant the binary oppositions that ran through Brecht’s practice at the BE” (241).

Helene Weigel, the BE’s *Intendantin* and Brecht’s widow, oversaw the solidification of the BE as a “Brecht theater” after his death in 1956. Barnett argues that this was both a singular achievement and a result of the failure to cultivate other approaches at the BE. Productions like the 1958 staging of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Wekwerth and Peter Palitzsch and Wekwerth’s 1964 *Coriolan* marked highpoints that the BE would not reach again until Heiner Müller’s own *Ui* production in 1995. On the other hand, the orthodox Brechtian approach of Wekwerth was already showing its age by the ill-fated production of *St. Joan of the Stockyards* in 1968. The late 1960s also saw the beginning of the faction struggles that became a permanent feature of the institutional structure, as a conflict between Weigel and Wekwerth ended in Wekwerth’s ouster. Weigel’s death shortly following this power struggle soon gave way to another, as her successor, Ruth Berghaus, quickly fell afoul of Brecht’s daughter, Brecht-Schall, and her husband, BE lead actor Ekkehard Schall, as well as those in the SED interested in Brecht-*Pflege*, with her innovative stagings of plays like *Señora Carrar’s Rifles* and *The Mother*. Berghaus’s term as *Intendantin* represents a lost moment for the BE in Barnett’s

book, where the BE could have developed a critical post-Brechtian theater that would have addressed the contradictions of actually existing socialism. Instead, Wekwerth replaced Berghaus in 1977, and he remained in charge of the ensemble until the Berlin Senate sacked him in 1991.

Wekwerth is often portrayed as one of the gallery of villains in the story of the BE, and one of the virtues of Barnett's account is his even-handedness in narrating Wekwerth's tenure. Barnett gives him credit for some notable productions, but concludes, "Wekwerth represents, in his own thoughts on Brecht, positions that both neglect Brecht's theoretical openness and push an agenda that valorizes the stage as a site of authority that then transmits its lessons to the audience" (377). At a time when, for example, Müller was pushing Brecht's legacy to its limits, Wekwerth stood for what Barnett describes as a "simulacrum of political theater" that "gave the illusion of change while the GDR went about its normal business" (318). Wekwerth was also engaged in an almost endless combat with Brecht-Schall, who increasingly sought to police the boundaries of the Brechtian through her control of the rights to stage the playwright's works in East Berlin. By the time the GDR collapsed, the BE was itself in danger of losing its identity as a cultural institution. Barnett gives a detailed analysis of the privatization of the BE by the "gang of five" appointed to run the theater by the Berlin Senate in 1992, noting with some irony that leftists like Müller and Peter Zadek pursued ruthlessly neoliberal policies in the name of securing the BE freedom from the market (374). Barnett argues that the BE had a brief resurgence under the directorship of Müller, but has moved away from its firm identification as a "Brecht-theater" since it was taken over by Claus Peymann in 1999. Barnett's book is a fascinating exploration of the BE,

whose history was largely coextensive with that of the GDR, as a sustained, and likely not to be repeated, attempt to develop Brecht's method in a sustained fashion.

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