

Critical Acts

Under the Sign of The Mother

The Wooster Group's Learning Play

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With a learning play...

Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* (a learning play) is the flagship production of The Wooster Group's Covid-19 (non)season. According to the production timeline published on The Wooster Group's website, they started working on research and translation of Brecht's 1932 play in October 2019, and commenced rehearsals towards the end of the following month (The Wooster Group n.d.). They were still in rehearsals in February 2020 when the pandemic hit and theatres in New York and across the country closed down. I recall hearing about their project at some point during that convulsive year, and received its first formal announcement through the Group's mass email fundraising campaign at the end of December 2020. They first performed their new piece at the Wiener Festwochen in Vienna, Austria, in June 2021, during a brief interval between two waves of Corona, as SARS-CoV-2 is referred to colloquially in Austria and in that part of Europe. Fighting through different strains of the virus and ever-changing measures imposed by federal, state, and local authorities, *The Mother* opened for its first run at the Performing Garage on 12 October 2021, with the second run scheduled from 18 February–19 March 2022, more than two years after The Wooster Group had started working on it.

Instead of adjusting to pandemic conditions, The Wooster Group pushed through them. As far as I know, they didn't take their work online (they posted videos of some of their older works on their website, free of charge), and they didn't scrap their pre-pandemic plans to mount yet another *Oedipus* or some other work from the scourge repertoire that quickly emerged on the Zoom theatre scene. Pandemic or not, the choice of Brecht's most ambitious learning play was unusual, even by the standards of these doyens of New York's alternative theatre scene, which in the last decade or so created performances based on sources such as Tennessee Williams's play *Vieux Carré* (2011), Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (*Cry Trojans!*, 2014), LPs (*Early Shaker Spirituals*, 2014; and *The B Side: Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons*, 2017), Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film *Town Bloody Hall* (*The Town Hall Affair*, 2017), and a restaging of their own 1978 *Nayatt School* (2019). Even in relation to this broad and eclectic range of sources, *The Mother* is an unusual choice.

From its very beginnings in the 1970s within The Performance Group, The Wooster Group cultivated a unique approach to politics *in* and *of* performance, which was never overstated, direct, and, the least of all, propagandistic. Instead, they preferred ambiguity, understatement, and irony in their approach to

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significant political issues, from racism in *Route 1&9*, to the counter-culture in *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)*, to feminism in *The Town Hall Affair*. Ron Vawter summarized The Wooster Group's credo on politics when he explained to David Savran that in their work, "politics operate on a deep, deep level. We are not overtly, or I should say, superficially political. None of us. We don't belong to political parties or feminist organizations. But I don't think we need to, because what we put into these works is so much of how we really feel politically. And I don't mean the politics of persuasion" (1988:146). It seems that Brecht's anarchic plays from the 1920s such as *A Man's a Man* or *In the Jungle of Cities*, and even his late works that focused on ethically ambiguous situations, such as *The Good Person of Szechwan* or *Mr. Puntilla and his Man Matti*, are closer to this sensibility. Truthful to their tradition of defying easy choices, the Group went for the most ambitious of Brecht's unapologetically propagandistic playlets from the period of the Nazi rise to power in Germany (1926–1933), which he dubbed *Lehrstücke*, commonly translated into English as "learning plays."

While during their long career The Wooster Group disregarded the genre categories of plays they staged and enjoyed bending the rules of genres whenever they could, in this production—to great effect—they wanted to emphasize the specificity of the theatrical form Brecht invented. On the program for the production, the name of the author and the title—Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother*—are followed, in parenthesis, by the genre: a learning play. As if that was not enough, and in line with the pedagogic nature of the *Lehrstück*, they added a quote from Brecht's text "The German Drama: pre-Hitler" (1935):

With a learning play, then, the stage begins to be didactic. (A word of which I, as a man of many years of experience in the theatre am not afraid.) The theatre becomes a place for philosophers, and for such philosophers as not only wish to explain the world, but wish to change it.

Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 80.
(The Wooster Group 2022:1)

In the article, originally published in the *New York Times* in 1935, Brecht precedes this thinly veiled reference to Karl Marx's famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach—"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" ([1845] 1998:574)—with a discussion of *The Mother*, which he uses as an example of a *Lehrstück*, his new, non-Aristotelian form of drama. A true dialectician, Brecht follows his assertion about changing the world by bringing that very idea into question: "Thus there is philosophy, thus there is instruction—but where is the fun?" ([1935] 2014:122).¹ A *Lehrstück* is not a philosophical lecture or a political speech, but a piece of theatre: "Doubtless the sort of learning which we remember from our school days, from all those preparations for professions, is a most toilsome, wearying affair. But there is a learning that is full of joy, full of fun, a militant learning" (122). Brecht answers his own question about the fun and joy of learning by suggesting, basically, that theatre should provide it.

And that is a problem. Almost a hundred years later and an ocean away, *Lehrstücke* are not fun. Back in the day, the learning plays' radical departure from conventional dramatic playwriting afforded Brecht opportunities to, as it were, jazz things up. In the same article, he explains that this new form of dramatic writing invites experiments in staging. Brecht points out that, together with his collaborators, he wanted to explore the ways in which a theatrical performance impacts not only the theatregoers, but first and foremost theatremakers. Brecht is very clear on that point: "These experiments were theatrical performances meant not so much for the spectator as for those who were engaged in the performance. It was, so to speak, art for the producer, not art for the consumer" (123). He accomplished this by expanding the base of producers to include specific kinds of audiences. For example, he used the new medium of radio in a school production of his learning play *The Flight of the Lindberghs* (1929): the music and

1. Here I am using the 2014 edition of *Brecht on Theatre*, edited by Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn. In John Willet's 1992 edition, which was for many decades the standard compendium of Brecht's theoretical texts in English, this article is abridged and this whole paragraph is lost.

solo parts were broadcast via the wireless, and pupils in their school sang choruses and performed minor roles (123). Speaking of choruses, Brecht also mentions that in one performance of *The Measures Taken* a workers' chorus of no less than 400 members participated (123).

Lehrstücke were works in progress. Brecht used performances to make significant alterations in these plays. For example, after first performances of *The Measures Taken* and *He Who Says Yes* he handed out questionnaires to the audience of workers and students, respectively, and used their responses to revise both plays (Mueller 2007:112). In some cases, the expansion of the producer-base involved the audience members—who were uninvited and unwelcome. Sergei Tretiakov, a great Soviet writer and Brecht's friend who witnessed performances of Lehrstücke in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, wrote that after 30 performances of *The Mother*, the censor banned its full production and gave permission only for staged readings. So, “the actors stood in a row and began to read,” in the presence of a policeman who made sure that they just delivered the lines, without making any gestures (1962:26). It turned out that the learning play could get its message across even under this kind of duress.

While Brecht's experiments were new and edifying in the late 1920s and early 1930s, today they seem utterly predictable and deprived of that joy and fun he expected from theatre. How could schoolchildren nowadays get excited about taking part in a radio broadcast, when they have at their fingertips possibilities to make their own podcasts and video channels? And what is so exciting about audience questionnaires in this age of digital consumerism, when any screen use comes with requests for feedback? Finally, at the high point of neoliberalism, in which free speech discourse has been hijacked and distorted by the right, who can even imagine the banning of an old leftist learning play?

For a learning play to be fun and joyous, there has to be in it something vital to be learned. Brecht's *The Mother* is a loose adaptation of Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel of the same title, which portrays the transformation of Pelagea Vlassova, a poor, illiterate, battered woman into a red flag-carrying revolutionary. In his novel, Gorky details the strategies of

organizing Russian factory and farm workers under conditions of heavy repression by government and police. This organizing was done by union activists and the communist left, whose activities were brutally suppressed by the tsarist regime. Gorky's novel is much more than a revolutionary bildungsroman about a senior citizen turned revolutionary. At the center of the novel is the relationship between Vlassova and her son Pavel, who was young when he was pressed into the labor force after her abusive husband died, exhausted by hard work and alcohol, leaving the family without income. Pavel soon joins revolutionary circles in the Suklinov factory. At first, the mother is suspicious of her son's ways, but she gradually begins to understand what workers' struggle is all about, and fully joins the cause after Pavel ends up in prison. The legend of Vlassova, the elderly revolutionary, spreads through the city of Tver, and beyond, through the Russian provinces. At one point, a worker exclaims: “She is probably the first mother who has followed in the footsteps of her son—the first” (Gorky [1906] 1947:231). But of course, Gorky's readers knew she was not: there was another one who did that some two millennia earlier, and this story retraces and reverses her steps. On a deeper level, this socialist hagiography of a peasant woman is a parable of the secularization of the Russian working masses. Vlassova never gives up her old ways—prayer, icons, humility—but she courageously takes her son's place in the revolutionary struggle.

Tretiakov, who knew his Russian literature, observed that “Gorky's *Mother* merely supplied the initial impulse” for Brecht's Lehrstück (1962:25). Indeed, in his learning play, there is little left of Gorky's story of the political education of a proletarian woman. At the beginning of the play, Brecht's Vlassova goes through the motions of resisting the call to political action. Very quickly, she casts off the veneer of an old woman's prudence and displays her true nature as a gritty revolutionary. Brecht has no time for Gorky's psychological portrayal of a peasant woman or for his depictions of life in provincial Russia. In his “Notes to *The Mother*,” he emphasizes that “not even for a moment” did the spectators of his Lehrstück “believe that what they saw described a particular historical occurrence in Russia” ([1932] 1965a:148). Instead, what he

offered them was a play about revolutionary organizing in German industrial cities. Its aim was to help the working audience “to recognize problems and tasks, to make comparisons, to raise objections, and to criticize the conduct of stage personages or, growing more abstract, to make applications to their own situations and from that to learn” (148). As Tretiakov observed, Brecht’s play is “a whole seminar on methods of propaganda and tactics in revolutionary struggle. How should people be utilized in the struggle? How should one enlighten the ignorant, by frontal attacks or by incursions from the rear?” (1962:26). I have no evidence about Brecht’s play, but I know that on at least some occasions Gorky’s novel accomplished the enviable goal of becoming a handbook of clandestine political action wrapped in a literary narrative, in the same way in which Vlassova uses political pamphlets to wrap snacks she sells to workers in the Suklinov factory.

Isolating in my parents’ house for Covid, which I contracted during my visit to Serbia in January of 2022, I found among my old books a copy of Gorky’s *The Mother*. I received it as an award from my elementary school at the end of eighth grade in recognition of my good work, as was the custom in schools across Yugoslavia. (Needless to say, the gift was a major disappointment; at that point in my life I would have preferred an LP record by The Clash or at least David Bowie.) With plenty of free time on my hands, I decided to reread the novel. Reread? Although I have discovered markings on the pages of the book, I am not sure if I have ever read it in its entirety, or if I even needed to. For Yugoslavs of my generation, that book contained one of those stories that everyone knew without necessarily having witnessed or read them. The high point of the novel is the trial of Pelagea’s son Pavel, in which he defies the court by declaring, famously: “A party man, I recognize only the court of my party and will not speak here in my defense. According to the desires of my comrades, I, too, declined a defense” ([1906] 1947:362).² I received the book not even a month after the lifelong president of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, had died.

Pavel’s defiant lines were branded in my memory. They did not necessarily come directly from Gorky’s novel, but from the endlessly repeated episode from the life of Tito, who used that exact quote during his 1928 trial in Zagreb, in which he was, together with a group of coconspirators, charged with the possession of a cachet of bombs and for propagating the outlawed Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Tretiakov was right in his assessment of Brecht’s play as a seminar on how to organize an underground revolutionary cell. I scarcely need more evidence of the efficaciousness of this kind of political theatre in interwar Europe. But in SoHo, in 2022? Almost every one of the following utterances that Brecht’s characters make seems hopelessly outdated:

The worker André, at the outset of the play: “We need to print our leaflets for today. The working class has gotten very agitated about the new wage cuts. For three days now we have been handing out leaflets at work” ([1932] 1965a:40). What leaflets? Why leaflets? When was the last time anyone in the audience has seen a political propaganda leaflet?

Pelagea Vlassova, arguing with a woman neighbor: “That is simply not true. Communism is good for us. What is this talk against Communism?” — and then she breaks into a song entitled “Praise of Communism”:

It’s sensible, anyone can understand it. It’s easy.
If you’re not an exploiter, you can grasp it.
It’s good for you; find out about it.” (73)

The members of Brecht’s proletarian audience might have been incited to study communism. But, the audience in the Performing Garage? Do they care? Do they want to know? How can The Wooster Group make these and all those other much less esoteric lines resonate with spectators who on their way to the theatre passed Versace, Dior, Apple, and Ralph Lauren stores, and many other brightly lit shops and restaurants in heavily gentrified SoHo? The answer is simple: they don’t.

2. Gorky modeled Pavel Vlassov and Pelagea Vlassova on the real-life revolutionary Petr Zalomov and his mother Anna Kirilovna. For more on this genealogy of Gorky’s novel, see my article “From Mastermind to Body Artist: Political Performances of Slobodan Milošević” (2008:69).



Figure 1. Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* (a learning play) (2021), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. Pictured: Kate Valk. (Photo by Maria Baranova)

The theatre becomes a place for philosophers...

For the most part, The Wooster Group's production of *The Mother* is not an update of Brecht's play; however, it is not a piece of museum theatre either. *The Mother* was the only Lehrstück Brecht directed at the Berliner Ensemble after WWII (1951), and The Wooster Group's piece partly references the film recording of that production. The color scheme of the set creates an impression of a black-and-white movie. Stage right, there is a small cubicle representing Pelagea's room. Front and center is a long table, the scenographic signature piece of The Wooster Group that goes back to *Nayatt School* (1978). There are a number of objects scattered on its surface: microphones, cups, a picture frame, a blue mechanical typewriter. On a small desk stage right is a laptop, and on the other side of the long table, a blue keyboard that Gareth Hobbs, who plays Pavel, occasionally uses throughout the performance. Suspended diagonally across the stage is a wire with some small LED lights and a card hung on it. On the back wall, there are two doors with signs "way"

and "out," and between them, a flat-screen monitor mounted on a high pole. The cubicle, the table, and the monitor belong to the well-established visual vocabulary of The Wooster Group. The only true innovation is a backdrop on the rear wall, positioned above the doors and the TV stand. It depicts an industrial landscape from turn-of-the-20th-century Russia, dominated by a factory gate with the word "Suklinov" inscribed on the arch spanning over it. As I settle into my seat, I notice that the backdrop is a video projection with slowly moving clouds and black birds circling across the sky.

True to the genre designation printed on the program, The Wooster Group's learning play begins with a mini lecture; however, it does not address labor organizing and revolutionary struggle, but the author of the play, his respect for Lenin, his adaptation of Gorky's novel, and his invention of Lehrstücke. This introductory lesson is delivered by Jim Fletcher, who plays the Teacher and several smaller parts, and who throughout the night steps out of his roles to offer explanations and fill in the narrative of the play. Having finished his introductory lecture, Fletcher signals his



Figure 2. Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* (a learning play) (2021), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. From left: Kate Valk, Jim Fletcher. (Video still by *The Wooster Group*)

shift to the character in the play by adopting a flatter, almost mechanical mode of delivering his lines. This stepping in and out of the character is a technique that *The Wooster Group* has been using from its early days. Kate Valk, who plays Pelagea Vlassova, leads the way in the group's deployment of this form of acting.

Over the decades of her work with *The Wooster Group*, Valk has developed a range of strategies for constructing stage personalities, and putting them on and taking them off. Often, she does this by using vocal techniques. From her work with accents in early performances (*Route 1&9*, *L.S.D.*), to her use of breathing in her mid-career pieces (*To You, the Birdie!*), to singing in her more recent directorial work (*Early Shaker Spirituals*), Valk has explored a broad range of ways of producing and manipulating vocal effects to shape the personages she is presenting onstage. That does not mean that her bodywork lags behind. Rather, if she uses her voice as a kind of vocal *partitura* that she can detach from her body in order to work on it, to shape, alter, and ultimately, control it, that does not mean that her body remains neutral and passive. If, in Valk's performance, her voice has a musical quality that is not reducible to singing, then her bodily work resembles that of a screen actor.

She moves through a series of simple, clearly outlined poses. They are connected by a series of equally clear, sharply outlined gestures. For example, when facing the proscenium, she fixes her gaze slightly upward, towards the top seats in the house, as if she was in a shot captured by the camera from below. And similarly, when addressing her coperformers, she seems to be looking through them, staring at an invisible lens positioned slightly in front or behind them. Valk's acting for camera on a theatre stage makes her Pelagea slightly out of sync with actions around her. This frees Valk to accelerate her delivery or slow it down, to adopt recognizable gestures and poses without trying to appear psychologically convincing. The pathos of her poses and speeches stands in stark contrast with the pragmatic acting of other cast members. Ari Fliakos and Erin Mullin (who is sporting a glittering hammer and sickle brooch on her beret) are the Revolutionary Workers, always in a hurry and always dead serious. Their conspiratorial tone spills over to a number of other personas they bring onstage. What we witness are sequences of provisional positions and routinized behaviors that actors present and manipulate in front of us. These strips of behavior and spurts of speech are materials that performers use not to

create psychological characters, but a certain mode of stage presentation that takes Brecht's writing as the starting point.

The formulation "strips of behavior" comes from Richard Schechner's theory of restoration of behavior, which he started developing in his work with The Performance Group. He suggested that these strips, like slices of film reel in the process of editing, can be "rearranged and reconstructed" and taken out from their original context, or "causal systems" (1985:35). The founding members of The Wooster Group (Elizabeth LeCompte, Ron Vawter, and Spalding Gray) worked with Schechner in the mid-1970s. As David Savran points out, they took what had been "handed" to them, namely, the idea of theatre as a "site of schism, or separation between actor and character," but did not settle with Schechner's "working methods" and instead proceeded to "undermine them from within" (1988:62). LeCompte and Gray were in a number of Schechner productions with The Performance Group, including Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1975). Speaking of the "new acting style" devised for this production, Schechner observed that "what we do [...] is to say, when you are in the situation of the scene, then you should be in the situation of the scene, but when you are not in the situation of the scene, just relax. Presence is of no great importance" (in Ryan 1975:91). If, at all times, the actor is both herself and the character, the signification does not end once she stops "acting."

While working on *Mother Courage*, Gray, LeCompte, and other performers started devising *Sakonnnet Point* (1975), which would become the first Wooster Group piece, presented at the time as a Performance Group work. Dispensing with the dramatic text and adopting autobiographical and found material and dance techniques, they started this work of "undermining" and dismantling the dual position of performer and character. As Savran recognized, that made their works, to some degree, always about the group itself (1988:117). The group retained and further developed this approach after they started using dramatic texts again, in the 1980s and beyond. What is significant about *The Mother* is that in this production, for the first time since her departure from The Performance

Group, LeCompte engaged the foundational figure of the kind of theatre that called for a decisive break from psychological and illusionistic representation. In Brecht's development of his aesthetics, the invention of *Lehrstücke* paved the way for that break. In his "Notes to *The Mother*," we can recognize some of the basic principles of The Wooster Group's approach to live performance. Here he writes, for example, that "the stage itself assumed a position, as it were, in regard to events: it quoted, recounted, anticipated, and reminded" ([1932] 1965a:133). The last two operations — anticipating, reminding — are especially important for the intervention that The Wooster Group makes in relation to Brecht's learning play.

The Mother is an unusual *Lehrstück*, even by Brecht's standards. It is much longer than, say, *He Who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No* (1929–1930), and unlike *The Flight of the Lindberghs*, there is almost no experimentation with new technologies and unusual stage devices. Brecht very liberally picked and chose characters, situations, and narrative fragments from Gorky's novel. His goal was not to produce a straightforward dramatization. While completely omitting some key scenes from the novel, Brecht amplified the role of the teacher Nikolay Vyesovshchikov (just called the Teacher in The Wooster Group production). What makes that decision odd is that, unlike his brother Ivan, Nikolay is hardly a revolutionary. A member of the provincial petit bourgeoisie, he doesn't believe in organized labor and is suspicious of the revolutionary project. In his first onstage appearance Nikolay unloads on his brother, the revolutionary: "I disapprove of your activities, all of them, completely. They amount to utter nonsense" ([1932] 1965a:71). But it gets worse. In the scene in which he teaches Vlassova how to read, Nikolay admits to his mistrust of all knowledge: "I know that everything, at bottom, is nonsense. Books are nonsense. They only help men to become worse and worse" (77). By placing a deeply skeptical teacher at the center of several scenes, Brecht creates an unusual internal pedagogical dynamism in his learning play. It is not the teacher who is teaching the illiterate peasant woman, but the other way around. The platform of her

lessons, or her cathedra as it were, is her experience of oppression and her belief in the revolutionary struggle. She teaches even while being taught.

The mother is learning how to read. It's an actual learning situation in the learning play. The teacher is offering the words "branch, nest, fish," but she is asking for "worker," "class struggle," and "exploitation" ([1932] 1965a:78). When the teacher protests, she explains: "Do you want to know what 'reading is class struggle' means? It means we can put together our own pamphlets and read our own type of books, once we can read and write. Then we can be the leaders in the class struggle?" (77). The scene is interrupted by the song "In Praise of Learning," which was "sung by those who are learning":

Study from bottom up,
For you who will take the leadership,
It is not too late!
Study the ABC; it is not enough,
but study it! (79)

Here, the ABC refers to political literacy of a very specific kind. In *The Measures Taken*, the three Soviet agitators bring to the Chinese workers "the teachings of the Classics and the Propagandists: the ABC of Communism" ([1930] 2001:11). Many in Brecht's proletarian audience could easily recognize the reference to Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeni Preobrazhensky's *The ABC of Communism* (1920).³ Although that could work in the theatre for the industrial age, the lines of "In Praise of Learning" sound uncomfortably inapt in the postindustrial age—especially when delivered in New York's SoHo, the site of the US's most aggressive and most successful de-industrialization of urban manufacturing. After all, it is worth remembering that we are in the Performing *Garage*, the place that used

to be a metal stamping factory with deep ties to industrial labor.⁴

The Wooster Group's performance establishes the relationship to Brecht's learning play that is analogous to the play's relation to Gorky's novel. If Brecht estranges (*verfremden*) Gorky's novel by transposing its action from a Russian province to a German industrial zone, then LeCompte and her collaborators estrange Brecht's *Lehrstück* by transferring it to de-industrialized SoHo. Brecht's attitude towards Gorky's novel is probably best reflected in his revision of the story's finale. Quite surprisingly, Brecht, who considered court proceedings as one of the most effective and *instructive* forms of nonaesthetic performance available to theatre, and inserted, whenever he could, situations of formalized judging in his plays (for example, *The Measures Taken*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Life of Galileo*), decided not to include in this play the courtroom scene in which Pavel denounces the bourgeois legal system. He replaces it with a series of three short scenes that advance the narrative both in time and place. All pretense of a prerevolutionary age is gone. The mother is a revolutionary woman at the outbreak of WWI, resisting as best she can the militarization of German society, which headed a series of events that led directly to the here and now of the performance of Brecht's *Lehrstück* in January 1932 at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin. This is where LeCompte departs from Brecht.

As Valk, Fliakos, Mullin, and Hobbs deliver Brecht's lines intended for industrial workers, there is a different kind of teaching that runs parallel. When he sets aside his role as the Teacher, Fletcher offers lessons about Brecht's theatre—and Brechtian acting in particular. He explains that when he takes the role of the policeman, he does not internalize the character,

3. *The ABC of Communism* was published in 1919, and its aim was to educate the Russian masses about the goals of the Bolshevik Party and the methods of achieving them. Bukharin, the more well-known of the two authors, was a prominent Marxist thinker and one of the leaders of the October Revolution. The subject of one of the most prominent show trials, he was executed during Stalin's purges in the 1930s.

4. Richard Schechner explains that he called this space "garage" because when he first saw it, "two garbage trucks were parked there. But the place was a metal stamping place. What I called 'the pit,' a 30' x 6' trench at one side of the Garage, was where some of the machinery was housed. I used the pit in *Dionysus in 69* and again in *Makbeth*" (Schechner 2022).



Figure 3. Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* (a learning play) (2021), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. From left: Jim Fletcher, Kate Valk, Ari Fliakos, Gareth Hobbs. (Photo by Maria Baranova)

but shows it. Surely enough, this lesson is followed by Valk's demonstration of the difference between "showing" and "acting" in the scene in which Vlassova uses a crafty syllogism in order to convince her comrades to let her distribute leaflets at the Suklinov factory. The worker who was suspected of distributing the propaganda material has been arrested. If the leaflets stop showing up in the factory, the authorities will take that as definitive proof that the arrested man was the agitator. So, it is necessary to continue the circulation of propaganda leaflets among workers, but whoever takes up that task would face the danger of being arrested. Is it worth it? Does the necessity justify the danger? Vlassova's reasoning is a veritable demonstration of dialectics: "It is not dangerous, but it is necessary. Although we are suspected, we have to hand out the leaflets. It is necessary, that is why it is not dangerous" ([1935] 1965a:48). As the performance carries on, Fletcher offers lessons about Brecht's "not, but" technique, and explains that the group didn't have enough "dinero" to hire more actors, so they have to perform multiple roles. In the same way in which Brecht replaces Gorky's trial scene with scenes from the early days of WWI, LeCompte discards the final

scenes of Brecht's play. Suddenly, the projection depicting the Russian landscape is replaced with a panorama of Los Angeles, and the sign for the Suklinov factory is replaced by the Hollywood sign: the industrial landscape turns into a postindustrial media-scape.

There are two actors in the shadow of the sign. Fletcher confesses to his companion: "I can barely afford my old house. So I think the plan is to sell the house and buy a condo in Toluca Lake, bank the money. You know, live off it. That type of thing. Hopefully, I score come next pilot season." These are no longer Brecht's lines. The struggling actor's little speech comes from Quentin Tarantino's 2019 film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. This is not a scene from the life of revolutionaries, but from the life of performers. Here, the dialectics of danger and necessity has been inverted. Theatre has to be safe, it cannot be dangerous, and therefore it is not necessary. In other words, if in theatre there is nothing that is dangerous, that is because in it there is nothing that is necessary. As Covid has shown, the world can go on quite comfortably without live, in-person performances

that are the very lifeblood of theatre. In the same way in which the call words of organized labor — class struggle, exploitation, communism — encounter the limits of their relevance in the postindustrial landscape of New York's SoHo, the actors caught up in this play have to come to terms with the fact of theatre's permanent awareness of its own irrelevance. Once *The Mother* reaches the final scene, it becomes clear that this production of Brecht's play for the industrial age is about the precarious existence of actors. The question is not "who cares about class struggle," but "who cares about theatre?" Who cares about acting? Who needs live actors? The play about a group of communist agitators roaming the industrial landscapes of prerevolutionary Russia becomes a performance about a group of performers in search of their own relevance in our pandemic-ravaged, fully mediatized landscape.

...of many years of experience in theatre...

Once it fully internalizes the conviction of its own dispensability, theatre starts putting on bells and whistles to conceal its own fears. The Wooster Group is fully aware of this. They started addressing this melancholy dimension of theatre at least as early as 1984 in *L.S.D. (Just the High Points)*, with the seedy dance group from Miami, Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos, and more recently with the players in *Hamlet* (2007), and the group of actors in a Sci-Fi B movie in *La Didone* (2009). But, in *The Mother* this self-referentiality takes place under different circumstances. Here, the taking on of dramatic personas and their dispensation does not have the same significance as it did a few decades (*L.S.D.*) or a few years ago (*La Didone*). Brecht's *The Mother* is not about age, nor is The Wooster Group's staging of that play. I was surprised to be reminded that the old lady who is the protagonist of Gorky's novel is 40 years old; Brecht changed her age to 42; and I believe that in The Wooster Group production I heard 48. Valk performs Vlassova with her natural graying hair. But that role is not about getting old, or aging well, or all of that geriatric stuff. It is about acting and about actors, and how to act again and again, and how to do it in a world that seems to have moved

on, in so many ways, from the art that demands the presence of live actors.

Lehrstücke afforded Brecht an opportunity to take a liberal approach to his sources. *The Mother*, where he freely borrowed from Gorky, was preceded two years earlier by *He Who Says Yes* (1930), in which he appropriated Zenchiku's noh play *Taniko*. That was his early encounter with a non-European theatre genre, which would become one of the key sources of his theories of acting, especially after his encounter with the Chinese master actor Mei Lanfang in 1935 in Moscow. A nonimitative relationship of actor to his role is one of the central aspects of the kind of theatre to which *Taniko* belongs. In *The Art of Nō Drama*, Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) writes that "in the art of Role Playing, there is a level at which imitation is no longer sought. When every technique of Role Playing is mastered and the actor has truly become the subject of his impersonation, then the desire to imitate can no longer exist" ([~1400] 2000:100). Zeami offers as an example an actor preparing to play the role of an old man. He suggests that, once he fully assumes the personality of the elderly person, the actor does not need to imitate him, but can instead think about the actions of that person onstage. Having given up the goal to mimic that which he is not, the actor can begin to "enjoy his own performance to its fullest extent" (100). Here, to act is not to emulate a character, but to take possession of it. It is not about deception, but about ownership.

While other political tutorials in *The Mother* today appear strikingly outdated, there is one lesson that addresses the reality of the situation in which it is performed. Early in the play, Pavel and his comrades Ivan and Anton attempt to explain to Pelagea the paradox of ownership in capitalism. They set up an analogy between the Suklinov factory and the table in her home. The situation is clear to the mother: the factory owner can "do what he wants with his factory — since it belongs to him" just like her table belongs to her ([1932] 1965a:61). But not so fast: the factory is also the tool that the workers use to earn their salaries. The son instructs the mother: "His factory is his property. But when he closes it he takes away our tools" (61). She protests that the mode of usage

does not change the fact of ownership. Here we reach the limit of the analogy between the commodity and the means of production:

There is a big difference between whether a table or a factory belongs to you. A table really can belong to you. So can a chair. Nobody is hurt by it. Suppose you feel like setting them up on your roof; what harm can it do? But when a factory belongs to you, you can hurt hundreds of men with it. In this case, you are a man who owns *others'* tools; and you can use them to get use out of men. (62)

Listening to this lesson, I am reminded that The Wooster Group owns The Performing Garage. It is, in great part, due to this ownership that the Group is the longest-lasting collective on the experimental theatre scene in New York (and far, far beyond). But, they are not entrepreneurs who make their living by giving their property up for rent, as many do in highly fashionable SoHo. Ivan concludes the lesson:

There's another unusual thing about his property. Unless he is using us with it, it's no good at all to him. It's only worth something to him so long as it is our tool. The moment it stops being our means of production, it turns into a bare heap of scrap iron. Even with all his property, you see, he cannot get along without us. (62)

And they, the workers, cannot get along without the means of production. Without tools, they can only join the lumpenproletariat, precarious workers who are up for grabs. There is, in other words, the right of the workers to the means of production, but also an obligation to it. Their relationship to the ownership of the tools is different from the relationship of the industrialist. It is defined not only in legal and economic but also in existential and ethical terms. Once they take on the means of production, they cannot easily dispense with them. In other words, if you own the theatre, you have to answer to it.

This points back to that first mother at the very beginnings of The Wooster Group. I remember the slide show of Schechner's production of *Mother Courage* that he presented

in his graduate student seminar. In the windowless room 610 in NYU's Department of Performance Studies, we witnessed another windowless room not that far away. That windowless room was much larger than our seminar studio, but not enough to accommodate Courage's wagon on the move on a revolving stage, that central metaphor in Brecht's play about war and commerce. Instead, Schechner explained, he decided to turn the entire Performing Garage into the wagon. "It was our wagon, our means of existence," he said. There were powerful images of actors strapped in harnesses extending back to the scaffolds and walls behind them.

In that production, LeCompte played the General, Yvette, and the Peasant Mother. Like other members of the cast, she participated in making some key decisions. She explained:

One of the biggest decisions that we made was that we would generally not pursue the war images in the play, which for us were very abstract. We decided that we could identify with fluctuations in business and the economy. All of us have a deeper understanding of what kind of stresses that puts on us. Thinking about war became a secondary thing. We sort of separated ourselves at a certain point in rehearsals from the politics of the piece and worked on it technically, like what it's like to barter, what it's like to bargain for money, what kind of gestures come out of that kind of thing, what it is like to pull a wagon if the wagon is not going. (in Ryan 1975:90)

What happens when the means of production is implicated with a movement in time, rather than in space? Once harnessed to the Garage, LeCompte entered a relationship of obligation to it. The very environment in which it existed demanded that it also operate as a business venture. This dual function of the Performing Garage informs The Wooster Group's methods of work and their aesthetics in myriad ways that are not easily perceptible on the surface of its performances. The twofold artistic and business undertaking provides its internal structure, as if the scaffolding from The Performance Group's production of *Mother Courage* was

internalized and rendered invisible, but present. Which recalls that other mother who hovered in the Garage during the formative years of The Wooster Group: Bette Gray, whose suicide her son Spalding tried to come to terms with by staging, together with LeCompte, his partner at that time, the memories of his childhood and documents of his mother's demise in *Rumstick Road* (1977), the centerpiece of The Wooster Group's inaugural trilogy, *Three Places in Rhode Island*.

The production of Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* (a learning play) came almost five decades after The Wooster Group presented to the public its first piece, *Sakonnet Point*. How does one carry on producing new work and maintaining the freshness and excitement of experimental theatre over 50 years?

The answer might be in learning: as she acquires new knowledge of class struggle, Pelagea Vlassova turns from an old, tired woman into a youthful and indefatigable revolutionary (she even begins acting younger than her age: towards the end of the novel, Gorky hints that she falls in love with the teacher). But that is not all. During his years of exile, Brecht returned to the idea of learning in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (there is an inner, somewhat ironic connection between his *The Mother*, which concludes with the selling of copper that the state turns into ammunition, and this allegory about the buying of cheap scrap metal, *messing* or brass). In the section entitled "About Ignorance," the philosopher and the dramaturg are talking about the possibility of the audience learning something in the theatre. The former is asking if theatre can teach anything without resorting to commentary. How does a performance teach without lecturing? The dramaturg proposes that in theatre, "you don't merely see things, [...but] share an experience" ([1963] 1965b:32). The philosopher retorts that one doesn't always learn from experience: for example, when changes happen too slowly so that they elude perception, or when the experiencer can't recognize the causes of change. When the dramaturg objects that the best way of learning is by doing, the philosopher turns to the nature of theatrical representation: "The kind of experience the theatre communicates isn't doing things yourself. And

it'd be quite wrong to treat each experience as an experiment and try to get everything out of it that an experiment can yield. There's a vast difference between experiment and experience" (33). And it is here, at the point when my interest is peaked to its highest degree, that Brecht kicks it back to me, the reader. The actor interjects: "Do me a favor and don't give us an elaborate account of that difference. I can work it out for myself" (33).

I want to believe that experience brings with it a certain mastery over the material. Having experienced something, one has a grasp of it. Experimentation puts that control and possession into question. It is an injection of ignorance, that is to say, innocence, into mastery. (Savran reports that Gray thought of *Sakonnet Point* as "strikingly innocent" [1988:58].) It asks mastery to suspend itself, and to take the position of nonmastery. By doing so, it positions the experience between mastery and novelty. With each production, The Wooster Group aims at this kind of questioning of its own practice honed over many decades. And further, on a more detailed level, this suspension of one's own mastery registers every time the actors in this theatre step in and out of their characters. In their work, the dialectics of danger and necessity is undergirded by the dialectics of experience and ignorance. This active search of nonmastery is what makes each performance of The Wooster Group worth going to, and what fuels the Group's long run.

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