

ARTICLE

# Love Me: From Politics to Ethics at the Berliner Ensemble

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## Introduction

Reading the news about theatre in Germany during the past few years, it is hard to avoid the impression that something new is happening: a theatre culture that long emphasized politics now just as often emphasizes ethics. There were the 2022 protests in Munich over claimed anti-Semitism in the play *Vögel (Birds of a Kind)* by Wajdi Mouawad, which led the Metropoltheater to cancel its planned production.<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Stemmann and Benjamin von Blomberg tried to make programming and ensemble changes to the Schauspielhaus Zürich, which they co-led, but the institution's governing board decided not to renew their contracts amid accusations that the theatre had become too “woke” for its audiences.<sup>2</sup> Most prominently, a new artistic team at the prestigious Theatertreffen festival in Berlin curated in 2023 a series of events to coincide with its traditional presentation of the year's ten “most notable” productions. These events included a “Responsibility Treffen” that looked “at how we can show our responsibility toward those who have lost the personal and structural circumstances necessary for working in the theatre.”<sup>3</sup>

The events I report here were not primarily about politics: not about the activities and relationships through which power is exercised, especially by governments. Instead, they are about harm and how to address harm, meaning moral harm: artworks are seen as making certain people less or more able to thrive together. So rather than attempts to intervene in power relations, the work of political theatre, we can see in these incidents an attention to personal behavior or responsibilities, to the self, to close relations, or to one's community: the work of ethics. Ethics explores, often through particular systems, approaches to how we should act, our obligations and permissions. In addition to writing about ethics, I also sometimes speak of moralism in this article; by *moralism*, I mean an approach to ethical questions that presents right and wrong as clearly differentiated. Although admittedly anecdotal, the events described above illustrate, I argue, a recent shift toward ethical

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considerations in the making, presentation, and consumption of theatre in Germany. This shift can be seen also in how many institutions have adopted US American social justice-style rhetoric (sometimes even using English words): they post “Content Note” trigger warnings on their websites;<sup>4</sup> they strive for audience “accessibility” and “inclusion”;<sup>5</sup> they investigate their progress toward “diversity.”<sup>6</sup>

Political theatre has not disappeared in Germany—rather, I am arguing that artists, leaders, institutions, and patrons are now giving major focus to individual behavior. In a larger book project, I am exploring ethics in the German theatre more broadly. Here I focus on the Berliner Ensemble, which provides a fascinating case study in the shift in emphasis from politics to ethics. On the one hand, the BE, as I show below, operates today as a normal municipal theatre. The prominence of ethics at the BE is not unique, but rather illustrative of the larger German theatre system. On the other hand, the BE is in fact unique among theatres in Germany because of its legacy of being founded by Bertolt Brecht: this legacy, which the institution fully embraces, including with regular productions of Brecht’s plays, has long made the BE an international icon of political theatre. So, the institution’s move to an ethical focus is especially noticeable and consequential.

In 2021–2 I lived in Berlin and during that season attended many performances at the Berliner Ensemble; the focus of this article is on that season, while also drawing on some examples from throughout the *Intendanz* of Oliver Reese, who has served as the BE’s artistic leader since 2017. I begin by examining the way Brecht at the BE made not just political but *politicized* theatre. Still, as much as Brecht stressed politics, he also thought about ethics, and this ethical thinking helps us to understand the relationships among politics, ethics, and aesthetics at the BE, then and now. With that foundation in place, I turn to the BE today, under Reese. Looking at how the institution functions, especially in its repertoire and the nontheatre events it hosts, we can see how the BE and artists who work there deemphasize politics in favor of ethics. Among other examples, I focus on two particularly interesting cases: the first, a production of Brecht’s *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*, 2021), shows what happens when a political play is moralized. The second, an immersive production titled *Berlau: Königreich der Geister* (*Berlau: Kingdom of Ghosts*, 2022), illustrates instead the rich aesthetic and philosophical potential of ethicized theatre.

## Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble: Politics and Ethics

The Berliner Ensemble was constituted by *Intendantin* Helene Weigel with Bertolt Brecht as artistic leader in 1949; the ensemble was in residence at the Deutsches Theater until 1954, when it moved to the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. Laura Bradley writes that until the death of Brecht in 1956, the “entire approach” of the BE “was underpinned by a holistic understanding of political theater—one that went far beyond the argument or subject matter of any individual play.”<sup>7</sup> David Barnett calls the BE’s holistic approach “politicized theatre”<sup>8</sup> or “making theatre politically,”<sup>9</sup> writing in *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* that this phrase, “deliberately differentiated from ‘making political theatre’, shifts the emphasis from content to form.”<sup>10</sup> Individual plays at the Berliner Ensemble had of course political subjects (unionizing a factory, say): Brecht did not attempt to choose neutral content, he chose specifically political content. But he did not stop there. The

Berliner Ensemble made theatre politically, from the structure and content of the plays, to their stagings, to the way the institution operated. In other words, Brecht made politics into a verb. Sometimes this meant, as Barnett writes in *Brecht in Practice*, that Brecht worked “to craft forms of drama and theatre that can point to the political in the most apparently unpolitical of situations in order to alert the spectator that even these things could change in a changed society.”<sup>11</sup> Bradley illustrates the holistic approach to politics through the BE’s 1951 production *The Mother*—a play of love and politics, in which love fully manifests by becoming political action. In that production’s opening scene, the BE located “the heroine’s struggle to feed her son in a global class context.”<sup>12</sup> While the audience heard Pelagea Vlassova (the mother) lament her inability to give her son the food he needs for his hard factory work, they saw projected on the stage “images of three working-class women.”<sup>13</sup> And, Bradley points out, the BE made this production politically: “During rehearsals for *The Mother*, its members attended weekly lectures on the Russian Revolution.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the production process, the play, and the production itself all engaged in political thinking about how the working class could emancipate itself.

Part of the holistic approach to politics at the Berliner Ensemble was the “workshop character”<sup>15</sup> of the production process. Barnett writes: “What marks the BE as different from any other company at that time was that it did not simply view itself as an institution that staged plays. Manfred Pauli, who undertook work experience at the BE under Brecht, calls it ‘a craftsman’s workshop [“Handwerksbetrieb”] or a research laboratory.’”<sup>16</sup> The techniques developed through this focus on process over product were meant to be successfully utilized, and developed upon, by other artists working in other contexts. To facilitate transferability of Brecht’s methods, Ruth Berlau and other collaborators made the famous documentary *Modellbücher*. These “modelbooks” established how to produce his plays by illustrating how decisions were made about the production, with photographs of stagings alongside set and costume designs and commentary on the playtexts and actors’ blocking. Other theatres and directors could borrow and use the modelbooks to help with their own productions, and some were even published.<sup>17</sup>

Though the Berliner Ensemble and Brecht himself emphasized politics, Brecht also used theatre to think about ethics. In his personal life, Brecht conducted his affairs in ways that sometimes hurt his friends and lovers; likewise, in his professional life, he sometimes miscredited the contributions of others to artistic productions he signed with only his name. These actions have shaped the reception of Brecht, and scholars and artists today struggle to balance his ideas, plays, and aesthetic innovations against his treatment of others. George Hunka, for example, reviewing Stephen Parker’s 2014 biography, writes that Parker both “abjures” the temptation “to interpret the life from a moral and ethical perspective” and also “paints a portrait of a most unpleasant man.”<sup>18</sup> Brecht himself dramatized the conflict between production and behavior in *Leben des Galilei* (*Life of Galileo*, first version written in 1938), among other plays. When the Procurator of Padua University visits Galileo to report that Galileo will not be given a raise—“Mathematics, so to speak, is an unproductive art”<sup>19</sup>—Galileo refashions a tube with two lenses his pupil Ludovico has told him about and presents it to the Doge as “a completely new instrument, namely my spy-glass or telescope.”<sup>20</sup> At the end of this essay, I examine a recent production at the

Berliner Ensemble about Ruth Berlau, who collaborated with Brecht and had a relationship with him, that uses Brecht's personal and artistic behavior toward Berlau to ask complicated ethical and aesthetic questions. For now, I turn to Brecht's materialist approach to ethics: an approach based, Markus Wessendorf writes, on "the idea that one should always behave as if not the next person but 'history' (i.e., the history of class struggle) would be the judge."<sup>21</sup>

In his thinking about how people treat each other, Brecht stressed that "morality reflects specific historical relations of production,"<sup>22</sup> as Wessendorf writes in an article about his materialist ethics. Or as Sonia Arribas puts it, "Brecht tries to integrate the political, the juridical, the ethical and/or the subjective *into* an analysis of the economic."<sup>23</sup> Arribas is careful to point out that Brecht did not make ethics the servant of economics, as some scholars have claimed of Marxism.<sup>24</sup> Brecht's thinking here, as elsewhere, was dialectical. "[A]t his best," Arribas writes, "Brecht neither neglects economic issues, nor dismisses the subjective responsibility and fundamental contradictoriness that lies at the source of ethical actions."<sup>25</sup>

Wessendorf argues that Brecht "conflates" materialism with two other approaches to ethics: "the mimetic-utilitarian idea that a social attitude or gestus of virtue can easily be copied . . . and is therefore useful for the facilitation of a more productive social climate; and the assumption that benevolence and kindness are expressions of human nature as opposed to aggressive and hostile behavior."<sup>26</sup> Many of his characters serve as models—negative, positive, and often, dialectically, both—such as the troubling case of the Young Comrade in *Die Maßnahme* (*The Measures Taken*, 1929/30), a play that edges on utilitarianism, with seemingly immoral means excused by revolutionary ends:

<Dia>The First Agitator <SD>to the young comrade<Dia>: If you are caught you will be shot; and since you will be recognized, our work will have been betrayed. Therefore we must be the ones to shoot you and cast you into the lime-pit, so that the lime will burn away all traces of you. And yet we ask you: Do you know any way out?

The Young Comrade: No.

The Three Agitators: And we ask you: Do you agree with us?

<SD>Pause.<Dia>

The Young Comrade: Yes.<sup>27</sup>

Here the Young Comrade performs a gestus of sacrifice—although that pause adds ambivalence, and the action feels cruel, even within the world of the play. Still, in contrast, an emphasis on *Freundlichkeit*, meaning "kindness" or "friendliness," can be found throughout Brecht's artistic work, perhaps most famously at the end of the poem "To those born after": "Oh we / Who wanted to prepare the land for friendliness / Could not ourselves be friendly. // You, however, when the time comes / When mankind is a helper unto mankind / Think on us / With forbearance."<sup>28</sup> Notice the echo with *The Measures Taken*: we are preparing the foundation for kindness.

Although Brecht favored "a case-by-case consideration of conditions, context, and means"<sup>29</sup>—as opposed to metaphysics and Kantian categorical imperatives—Wessendorf does find one normative virtue. Here he quotes Brecht's prose text "Mo Zi and Ethics," where the philosopher Mo Zi says: "I haven't found that

many 'you shall' sentences that I would like to enunciate. I mean sentences of a general nature, sentences that could be addressed to the general public. Yet one such sentence would be: *You shall produce.*<sup>30</sup> Such a commandment can also be found in the conclusion of *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1944). "What there is should belong / To those who are good at it. / Children to true mothers, / That they may thrive. / Carts to good drivers, / That they may be driven well." Most important: "the valley to the waterers," not back to its original, less productive use, "So that it bears fruit."<sup>31</sup> It is hard not to see some connection to Brecht's behavior—some excuse he might have given himself—in his admonition to produce and in his belief that we should imagine as the judge of our actions the history of the class struggle, and not, say, our friends and family.

Despite the normative virtue of production, and as much as his reputation says otherwise, Brecht rejected moralist education. In *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Szechwan*, 1941), for example, the good Shen Teh is pushed by her proto-capitalist society to become Shui Ta, who treats his fellow humans as means, not ends. Nicholas Ridout, in *Theatre & Ethics*, argues that in Brecht's satire of the gods in *Good Person* we watch "a sly attack on its own audience's desire to seek out ethical nourishment in the theatre."<sup>32</sup> Instead of offering the audience what they want—answers that promote their own values—the play incites debate. The answer to the question "Should men be better?"<sup>33</sup> posed in the play's epilogue, is that the economic-political system must be changed. But how? Wessendorf finds one answer in Brecht's approach to ethics: Marxist materialism, but practical and built from dialectics; a value ethics that allows for models of virtuous behavior (such as Mo Zi and the Young Comrade); and a general belief that people, like Shen Teh, are kind and will act with kindness, if only we can create a socialist state for them to live in.<sup>34</sup> For Brecht, good ethics emerge from good politics, and good politics from good ethics.

But good art comes first. Wessendorf quotes a late fragment from *Messingkauf*, or *Buying Brass*, that "includes the following statement in the form of a stage direction: '(The arts free of moral obligations).'"<sup>35</sup> Earlier in that conversation, during "The First Night," Brecht has the Philosopher say to the Dramaturg and Actor: "I thought we might use your imitations for very practical purposes: simply to find out the best way to behave. We could turn them into something similar to physics." The Dramaturg replies simply, "So your purposes are scientific ones! That's got nothing to do with art you know"<sup>36</sup>—though he also admits shortly thereafter that he doesn't see "why people shouldn't be able to draw practical lessons from our theatre as well."<sup>37</sup> Artworks do not necessarily provide good examples, but they can—or viewers can draw out good examples on their own. This freedom from moral *obligations* accords with how Brecht gave priority to aesthetics onstage and in his writing. Bradley points out that "instead of labeling his work political theater, Brecht used the terms epic theater and non-Aristotelian or dialectical theater—which placed the focus on aesthetics. This was consistent with his view that theater needed to stage its revolution on aesthetic grounds by developing methods for engaging with contemporary reality."<sup>38</sup> The Dramaturg in *Messingkauf* puts it more bluntly: "Yet theatre is a playful activity."<sup>39</sup>

After Brecht's death in 1956, the Berliner Ensemble slowly retreated from being a process-oriented institution—a dialectical, politicized theatre—intended as a model for others. Barnett documents this transformation in his history:

The BE after Brecht nonetheless represents a move away from what Fredric Jameson has called ‘one continuous master class, to which a paying public is invited only on selected occasions’. His point is that the company was originally more a giant workshop, experimenting with theatrical forms and ways of working, rather than a theatre that only staged plays. Over time, then, the BE *became* a theatre company; it did not start off as one in the conventional sense of the term.<sup>40</sup>

If the BE in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s was “post-Brechtian” to various degrees, by the late 1990s, Barnett argues, there was none of that dialectic pursuit left.<sup>41</sup> Barnett ends his book just before the *Intendanz* of Claus Peymann: “It was clear even back in 1997”—before he actually took charge of the Ensemble in 1999—“that Peymann was not coming to the BE to continue the tradition, but to break with it in favour of his own ideas and conceptions about how to run such a theatre.”<sup>42</sup> Although he still produced Brecht’s plays, Peymann seems to have seen himself as something of an exorcist, desiring “to drive out the ghosts of the past from the BE’s staff.”<sup>43</sup> Especially interesting for our purposes here is what Bradley writes about Peymann, in a different article than the one I have been quoting on politics, which is quoted by Barnett in his history: Peymann was “committed to the Schillerian concept of theatre as a moral institution, explaining that he wants to enlighten spectators in the tradition of Lessing, Schiller and Brecht.”<sup>44</sup> The Berliner Ensemble in the 2000s and much of the 2010s was neither Brechtian nor post-Brechtian in its aesthetics, politics, and ethics; it was a regular German public theatre.<sup>45</sup>

## The BE Today

Under the *Intendanz* of Oliver Reese, whose current contract runs through 2027, the BE continues to operate as a well-functioning, well-polished repertory theatre, not out of the ordinary in the German theatre landscape. It is one of several municipal theatres in Berlin, each with its own aesthetic, such as the Schaubühne, the Deutsches Theater, the Volksbühne, and the Maxim Gorki. There are also several prominent *Freie Szene* institutions there—which are subsidized by the city at lower levels, draw significant funds from grants, and host visiting artists instead of an ongoing ensemble—including Hebbel am Ufer, Sophiensaele, and Radialsystem. (For a full overview of the 2021–2 season in Berlin, which discusses many of these theatres as well as the BE, see my “Report from Berlin” published in *PAJ*.)<sup>46</sup> Like many of these theatres, the BE posts “Content Notes” on their website, subtitled “notes on sensitive content and physical triggers.”<sup>47</sup> According to two BE employees with whom I spoke,<sup>48</sup> these notes were a collaboration between visitor services and the audience engagement and pedagogy department (which I discuss in more detail below), with input from dramaturgy. The page begins with a skeptical paragraph about theatre as a place of triggering conflicts, with a nod to Brecht: “The negotiation of social conflicts is inherent in this theatre and can make it possible to experience how our reality is made, constructed—and is therefore also changeable.”<sup>49</sup> And yet (you can almost read the page as a dialogue!), a more convinced voice answers, “Depending on personal sensitivity, such confrontations can be perceived as (too) painful.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the Content Notes reflect an ethical decision about how the BE wants to treat its visitors: with kindness and consideration to all audience members, both the sensitive and the skeptical.



The Berliner Ensemble's brand is immediately recognizable among the posters that plaster the city, especially its logo, the Futura all-caps "Berliner Ensemble" inside a circle. Its marketing materials feel contemporary, while calling back to the BE's history in the similarity of the logo and font to those used at its founding.<sup>51</sup> But more than the marketing, it is Brecht's legacy that makes the BE unique. During the 2021–2 season in Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland, there were twenty-three different productions of plays written by Brecht.<sup>52</sup> Four of these productions (or 17 percent) were at the BE; other than the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, which produced two Brecht plays, no other theatre produced more than one. But these statistics don't quite capture the Berliner Ensemble's hold on Brecht: in fact, more than 25 percent of the total performances of Brecht plays happened at the BE, and more than 40 percent of spectators who saw a Brecht play saw a BE production. In other words, Brecht is produced throughout the German-speaking parts of Europe,<sup>53</sup> but especially at the Berliner Ensemble. Reese leans into the BE's Brecht legacy. And as we shall see, he invites in the Ensemble's ghosts.

The 2021–2 season at the BE featured twelve premieres, in a total repertoire of about thirty-six (as of 23 June 2022);<sup>54</sup> in this article I discuss seven of those premieres, plus one production from the very end of the previous season. Reese and his dramaturgy team program their repertoire with some of Reese's own work, as well as productions by prominent older directors, like Frank Castorf, Michael Thalheimer, and Barrie Kosky, and the work of much younger artists and artistic teams.<sup>55</sup> It is important to mention that 2021–2 was the first mostly normal theatre season in Germany following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. For most of the season, visitors were required to wear medical masks, show proof of vaccination, and even, at times, provide proof of a recent negative test. (These regulations were issued by Berlin; only rarely did individual theatre institutions establish stricter requirements.) Still, despite frequent COVID cases among performers, which required theatres on any given evening to replace actors quickly, or even cancel performances or switch productions, the theatres strove to mimic normal practices: actors engaged in physical contact with one another, for example, and audience seating was allowed at full capacity.

In his own directorial work, Reese skews toward more conventional aesthetics, at least for the German theatre: a *Regietheater* that foregrounds actors and ideas, not so much the director's own id. In January 2022, Reese premiered *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* (*My name is Gantenbein*), with Matthias Brandt, a well-known German actor, performing a monologue adaptation of Max Frisch's novel.<sup>56</sup> The set—a framed, rounded box like a giant television set or an aquarium, with a slightly forced perspective—directs attention to Brandt's performance of Frisch's midcentury exploration of identity, truth, and man in his society. It's a bourgeois production of a bourgeois text, focused on a man who is lost in some general, unstated way.

Three productions by other established directors are especially noteworthy. Barrie Kosky's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*)—which premiered August 2021 in the Berliner Ensemble's fifth production of the musical—was the season's biggest success with audiences, a showbiz spectacle that often sold out even before tickets went on sale to the full public.<sup>57</sup> Appealing to international

audiences—with a rapturous review on the front page of the Arts section of the *New York Times*<sup>58</sup>—it was, like several productions each month at the BE, performed with English surtitles. *Draußen vor der Tür* (*The Man Outside*, March 2022) was Michael Thalheimer at his best.<sup>59</sup> Working with Olaf Altmann, his usual set designer, Thalheimer mostly ignored Wolfgang Borchert's original post-war setting, "placing [the play] in a gorgeous field of colored lights [that became] the night sky, a river to drown in, a circus. As [the expressionist soldier-everyman] Beckmann, Kathrin Wehlisch is always onstage, both lit and obscured by Altmann's hanging bulbs."<sup>60</sup> The production, like the play, viewed bourgeois values, such as caring for family and disabled war veterans, through a dark lens: abandoned by everyone who should have cared for him as soon as he became an inconvenient presence, Wehlisch's Beckmann was left alone and screaming as the lights blinked off.

Castorf premiered his adaptation of *Fabian oder Der Gang vor die Hunde* (*Fabian; or, Going to the dogs*) in June 2021, at the end of the previous season.<sup>61</sup> This *Fabian* was played by Marc Hosemann as Bugs Bunny meets Mephisto. Wearing an ugly, ill-fitting black suit with a crimson shirt of fake silk, Hosemann's *Fabian* was abstracted, the character's moralism and irony mostly erased. Setting Erich Kästner's 1931 novel against letters written to Castorf describing complicated love triangles—which come across as deeply embarrassing to Castorf—the production's four or five hours ended with actresses taking over the stage, led by Margarita Breitzkreis as a diva. As Castorf's productions do when they are working at their best, I felt both disgusted and tempted by Hosemann and his compatriots, drawn by their charisma and impressed by their energy, but repelled by their actions, as when Hosemann mimed putting Breitzkreis's hand through a meat grinder. The *Anständigkeit* (moral decency) for which *Fabian* longs in Kästner echoes #MeToo, as Castorf flattened time in the production, mingling references to Nazis and Babylon Berlin with the extreme right-wing Alternative for Germany political party and the movie *Reservoir Dogs*. Castorf is a satirist, and the production left me laughing and uneasy: it made great fun of contemporary social justice values, and it also made great fun of Castorf himself.

Younger directors included Antú Romero Nunes, with a *Der Diener zweier Herren* (*The Servant of Two Masters*, December 2021);<sup>62</sup> Robert Borgmann and Nazanin Norri, with Sarah Kane's *Phaidras Liebe* (*Phaedra's Love*, April 2022, in the BE's smaller Neues Haus theatre);<sup>63</sup> Christina Tscharyiski with *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*, September 2021, also in the Neues Haus); and the collective Raum + Zeit with *Berlau: Königreich der Geister* (*Berlau: Kingdom of Ghosts*, May 2022, in the Neues Haus's black box space). Nunes's *Servant* was a howdy doody nightmare set in a German imaginary of the American frontier and performed in English (with German surtitles)—though neither Nunes nor any of the actresses are native English speakers. As the *Servant*, a German immigrant in lederhosen, Stefanie Reinsperger performed with great physical charisma, rattling off jokes. Still, Nunes didn't seem to trust the comedy: the play ended without marriages. Instead, Reinsperger skinned her pet lamb, two other characters committed suicide, and the remaining actresses (all the performers were women) sat around in long underwear mournfully playing "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" with a saw and a banjo. A single cornstalk, as high as an elephant's eye, waited solemnly for some





**Figure 1.** (from left) Cynthia Micas as Polly and Nico Holonics as Mack in the wedding scene of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*, directed by Barrie Kosky, 2021) at the Berliner Ensemble. Photo: © JR Berliner Ensemble.

breeze to set it asway. Reinsperger also dominated *Phaedra's Love*, a kind of audio-play installation set to ambient-hardcore noise in which Reinsperger played both Hippolytus and Phaedra. As Hippolytus—violent and lonely, sitting around masturbating, whining, and playing video games—Reinsperger's energy had little direction. But as Phaedra, a hot mess in a black crinoline hoop skirt, she performed the violence of Kane's language with relish. The production's grotesquery reached its climax with the *sparagmos* of Hippolytus. After he was disemboweled and his genitals thrown onto a barbeque—and just before he died, finally, the last of his family—text above the stage read: "If there could have been more moments like this,"<sup>64</sup> a line given to Hippolytus in Kane's play. Of these four, *The Mother* and *Berlau* are the most interesting to think about in terms of ethics; the former is a highly political play by Brecht that Tscharyiski made into a moralist production, whereas the latter took particularly bad conduct on the part of Brecht and theatricalized it, creating an immersive experience about ethics. In the following sections, I discuss these two in much more detail.

It is possible to read several of these eight productions as political. In Nunes's *Servant*, for example, the rich stay rich and the poor get beaten just for being around. *The Man Outside* felt well-timed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, if accidentally so, with its depiction of universal suffering both during and after the war. These politics are inherent in the original plays and emphasized, to a greater (Nunes) or lesser (Thalheimer) extent in the productions.<sup>65</sup> But whether considered individually or collectively, the repertoire prioritized ethical values and relations over political ideology and action. Given Brecht's legacy at the BE and his own

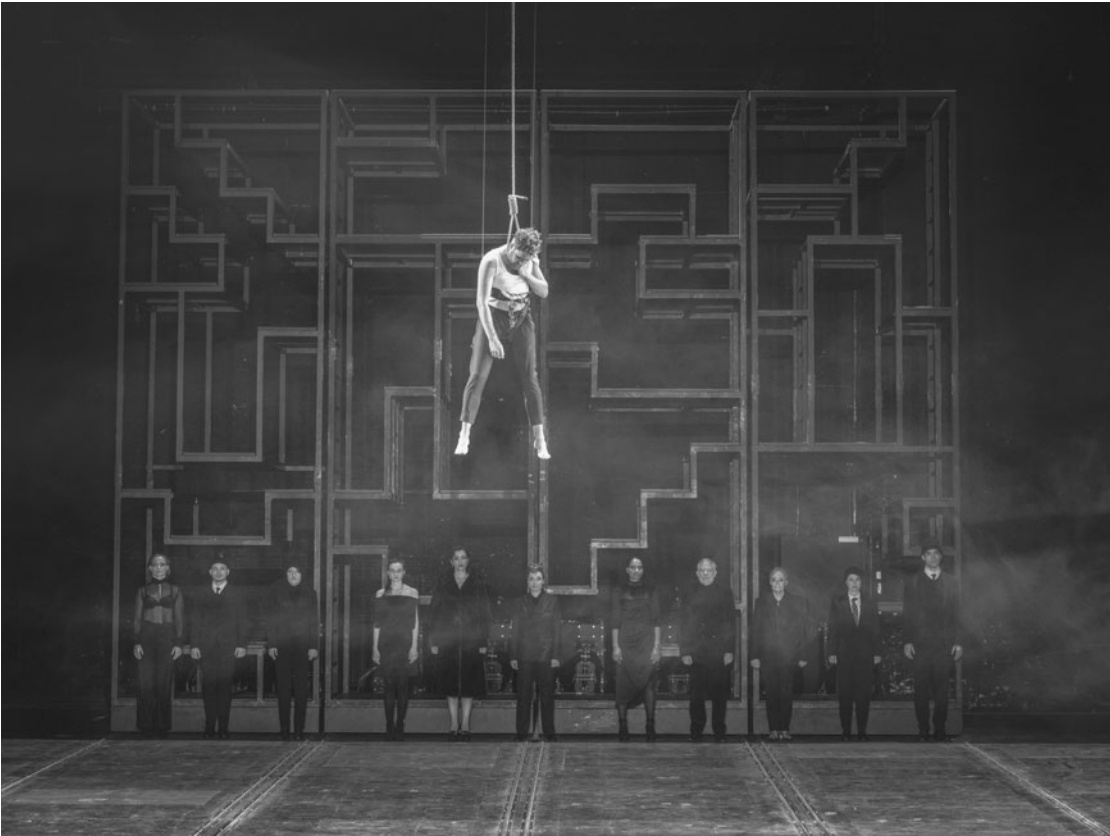
theorizing of politics and ethics, it's especially interesting to trace this shift in the new *Threepenny Opera*, so I start there. Thereafter I turn to *The Mother*, and finally, at the end of this essay, to *Berlau*.

Typical of Kosky, his *Threepenny Opera* projects an attitude of fun and ease. In the original, the audience loses its innocence or naivety, its belief that people are free to self-create and you can wash your hands of the blood of capitalism. Theatrical elements clash, and the audience beholds the ugly mobster violence of capitalist activity that covertly permeates all aspects of society, from the lives of beggars to families to gangsters to cops. In Kosky's version, to choose a single moment as a synecdoche for the whole, while Mack (Nico Holonics) and Polly (Cynthia Micas) get married, and just before the song "Seeräuber-Jenny" ("Pirate Jenny"), they engaged in a call-and-response with the audience. Both of them were trashy sexy, with Mack in tux with mascara and Polly in a feathery, short white dress, and they teased music director Adam Benzwi, just below them in the pit (Fig. 1). The scene did not so much implicate the audience as involve us: we were in on the joke.

Instead of staging capitalist violence politically—Mack's line about bankers as the greatest thieves, toward the finale, was cut, for example—Kosky's *Threepenny* flattered the morality of its audience: well-mannered cosmopolitans. Once "Pirate Jenny" began, Micas performed the song, in all its disgust and fury, *with* the audience and not against them. Micas, whose Polly does capture the character's need for freedom and her jealousy, is Black. But the production, as its German audiences like to imagine themselves, acted color-blind, everyone much too polite to acknowledge that "Pirate Jenny" did at least in part become about race when Micas performed it: a Black woman serving a mostly white audience. The color-blind choice here can be contrasted with Nina Simone's celebrated interpretations of "Pirate Jenny," which illustrate how the song can become strikingly political.<sup>66</sup>

The audience's moral superiority to that of the play's world was expressed also through aesthetic taste. Holonics's Mackie Messer was ugly and hungry. At the end, freed from the gallows, he was zipped into his suit and seemed to step out into public more dangerous than ever. Jonathan Peachum (Tilo Nest) wore a tawdry black velvet suit, and Frau Peachum (Constanze Becker) a body-length fur coat and seemingly nothing else: new money, baby. We're better than them. We—the cultural elite audience—have great taste, just look at us sitting here in the Berliner Ensemble, looking at the beautiful scaffolding set by Rebecca Ringst and listening to Benzwi conducting. So it's not so much that we laughed *with* Holonics as *at* him. The audience was superior, aesthetically and morally. We know how to behave. Compare this to the "sly attack" Ridout identifies in *Good Person*.

I don't want to be unfair to the production, which really was great fun. Kosky's *Threepenny* may have flattered the audience, but he did not try to teach a simple lesson. Instead, this *Threepenny* foregrounded the play's ethical questions. What is justice and why is it impossible in this world? How should we judge Mackie Messer? The audience might think about how ethical values can be hijacked by economic and religious systems in order to subjugate individuals. After Mack was lowered from the gallows, having hung high in the air for a near eternity (Fig. 2), a giant neon sign reading "LOVE ME" flew in behind him. Is it possible to live a good life, to love, within our economic, religious, and political systems? Or has



**Figure 2.** The hanging of Mack the Knife (Holonics) in *The Threepenny Opera*. Photo: © JR Berliner Ensemble.

love, as a value and as an act, been repackaged to increase consumption, while enabling the powerful to maintain power?

Wessendorf writes of Brecht's ethics that "the aim of his epic theater was to study intolerable social conditions and to discover means for their elimination."<sup>67</sup> In Kosky's *Threepenny*, as in Brecht, reversal followed reversal, suffering followed suffering. But where Brecht tasked his audience with recognizing themselves in the historicized situation of poverty, crime, and capitalist governance, Kosky did not: not as Mack was hanging—watched by the entire cast, in solemn black, standing in a line against the scaffolding and looking up at the swinging body—and not with the final reversal, when the *rex ex machina* arrived to free him. The production showed us intolerable social conditions, but without any specific historical relations. There was no need to compare the staged action to *our* intolerable social conditions nor *our* global class conflict. We were asked to think about justice and the good life in the abstract, as if considering thought experiments in a book of moral philosophy. In *Messingkauf*, the Dramaturg says of the actors in a great performance that "they acted in such a way as to keep the audience's interest focused on the ensuing development, the continuation: on the mechanics of the events, as it were. On the play of cause and effect."<sup>68</sup> Kosky was not interested in the play of cause and effect. More than anything else, he was interested in Holonics as Mack. Where Brecht wants history—the history of class struggle—to serve as judge, Kosky invites us—*we in the audience, we the good, the elite class*—to judge Mack and not our society.

### Moralizing *The Mother*

While Kosky's *Threepenny* mostly complimented the values of an older cultural elite, another production of a Brecht play that same season did the same for younger audiences, but more so, flattering their morality. Written in 1932, *Die Mutter: Leben der Revolutionärin Pelagea Wlassowa aus Twer* (*The Mother* [The mother: life of the revolutionary Pelagea Vlassova from Tver]) is one of Brecht's most insistently political plays. Adapted from the novel by Maxim Gorky and set in Tver, northwest of Moscow, just before the Russian Revolution, between 1905 and 1917, *The Mother* illustrates the revolutionary education of Pelagea Vlassova, who at the beginning is a religious woman living day to day, but who gradually learns from her son Pavel and his friends about unions and labor rights, and even how to read. After Pavel is killed, Pelagea becomes, at the play's end, a leader among the striking workers.

Directed by the young Christina Tscharyiski, born 1988, the 2021 Berliner Ensemble production of *The Mother*, with the new subtitle *Anleitung für eine Revolution* [Instructions for a revolution], was credited as "nach Brecht," or adapted from Brecht.<sup>69</sup> This is an especially noteworthy production for our purposes because it set out to adapt Brecht's communist learning play for Millennials and Gen Z—not only onstage, but also in its marketing campaign, which was far more extensive than that of the typical Berliner Ensemble production. In its adaptation for these new generations, the production and its surrounding apparatus moved between political and moral themes and forms, sometimes demanding that we come together in solidarity to alter systems and sometimes calling for social justice-style interventions in individual behavior and relationships.

While the production's subtitle is new, and a couple of long monologues supplemented Brecht's original text, including some writings by Pussy Riot member Nadya Tolokonnikova, most of the spoken language in Tscharyiski's *The Mother* came from the original play. Instead of making a full adaptation, Tscharyiski used mise-en-scène, music, and casting to write on top of Brecht's text, as when one scribbles notes over original pages and both new and old are visible at once. The scenery by Janina Audick and costumes by artist Verena Dengler referenced memes, Web 3.0, and crypto. There were pixelated GIF-style faces on the curtain stage right, and prints on pants, vests, and ties composed of thousands of small screenshots. Musician Manuel Poppe reset Hanns Eisler's original score for an onstage punk-indie band of guitar (which he played), drums, and keyboard. The cast of only six each played multiple roles, with Constanze Becker as the mother, Pelagea—a role taken over in the final couple of scenes by Josefin Platt. (Both Becker and Platt are Berliner Ensemble stars.) The cast was mostly femme and, other than Becker and Platt, strikingly young, with Sophie Stockinger as the son, Pavel, as well as a maid in later scenes (Fig. 3). Jade Pearl Baker, a drag performer well-known from the TV show *Voice of Germany* and a regular in a late-night bathtub at the cabaret BKA-Theater, also performed several roles. If Brecht's dramaturgy centered a woman, in a kind of pre-second-wave feminism, Tscharyiski further emphasized women both in the story and in the creative team. In a profile



**Figure 3.** Constanze Becker as “the Mother” Pelagea Vlassova holding the corpse of her son Pavel, played by Sophie Stockinger, in *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*, directed by Christina Tscharyiski, 2021) at the Berliner Ensemble. Photo: © JR Berliner Ensemble.

in the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Tscharyiski talked about her preference for working with women: “I am of the opinion that there are still too few women working in the theatre. I have an opportunity to create jobs for great female artists.”<sup>70</sup>

As noted above, *The Mother* of 1951 called up class consciousness by referencing worldwide hunger; Audick’s set, on the other hand, referenced a starvation more spiritual than physical, with a giant box of Demeter peas, an inexpensive organic brand, sitting stage left, its front defaced by graffiti. In her adaptation for the 2020s, Tscharyiski sought to generate revolutionary class consciousness in the psychically hungry gig workers of our digital capitalism: the precariat of Web 3.0, represented in the cast and those GIF-styles faces. A long opening monologue by Stockinger, Tscharyiski’s major addition to Brecht’s play, performed out of character in a kind of lecture style, set up the audience to read the rest of the play as about this precariat. “Yes in fact,” Stockinger began, standing just slightly stage right, in the middle of the stage: “There are indeed people still left behind by society.”<sup>71</sup> The speech, a tirade against neoliberalism, would not have been out of place at a Bernie Sander’s rally circa 2020. The change of subtitle—from “Life of the revolutionary” to “Instructions for a revolution”—insisted on a political interpretation. This is no mere history of revolution: it is a manual.

The marketing on YouTube and Twitter attempted something similar to the opening speech, framing the play through contemporary themes and encouraging users to post the hashtags #BEempowered and #Ermächtigteuch (the latter meaning roughly the same thing as the former, but without the nice pun). In a series of video interviews, members of the artistic team answered the question: “Wofür kämpfst du?”<sup>72</sup> (What are you fighting for?). Pearl Baker, Tscharyiski, Stockinger, and the actor Peter Moltzen listed issues that would sound familiar to young members of the creative class in the United States: climate crisis; sexual and bodily autonomy; gender equality; social equality; empowerment. Tscharyiski’s *Mother* was the most political, or at least it had the most *desire to be political*, of the productions I saw at the BE in the 2021–2 season.

Still, throughout the production and its apparatus, the politics edged into moralism. Take the hashtag #BEempowered, or, as Tscharyiski said in one of her promotional videos: “really it’s about empowerment.”<sup>73</sup> This is a personal message, drawn directly from the language of American-style social justice and often used by Tscharyiski and the other artists without translation into German. Empowerment is something you do to better your treatment of yourself: it may have “power” as a root, but this is a power of self-esteem and independence.<sup>74</sup> Tscharyiski said of *The Mother*: “It is a history of self-empowerment.”<sup>75</sup> As much as Tscharyiski’s *Mother* tried to generate a class consciousness of the precariat, it also wanted to generate a femme, gender-based consciousness grounded in self-empowerment.

Gunnar Decker suggested a revealing juxtaposition in *Neues Deutschland*, a socialist newspaper, arguing that Tscharyiski’s *Mother* reminded him of Frank Castorf’s 1997 adaptation of Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Die Weber* (*The Weavers*, 1892) at the Volksbühne Berlin.<sup>76</sup> Castorf took that protosocialist play and used it to satirize East German malaise, West German greed, and the post-Wall dissolving of ideology and equality into desire for luxury brands. For Decker, *The Mother* showed the ends of what Castorf had noticed was beginning more than twenty



years earlier, when people were living “in the direct shadow of the socialist system and in the middle of a history-free culture of fun, with its Love Parade and *Ballerman* vacations.”<sup>77</sup> By 2021 there was no longer even the shadow of other economic and cultural systems—just history-free capitalism everywhere, all the time.

Tscharyiski has inherited much from Castorf, including disassociating actors from characters, as seen in a wonderful moment in *The Mother* in which Moltzen gave an extended Aristophanic parabasis, dressed as an Old Holland Light Red paint tube, reveling in *Quatsch* (nonsense). Yet the class consciousness of *The Mother* was much less clear than what Castorf satirized and what Brecht depicted in the original, in part because Tscharyiski is more earnest than Castorf, and in part because this *Mother* was so tangled in moralism. Decker lamented the movement in Tscharyiski’s *Mother* from analyzing class based on labor and capital to class based on personal identity, a move common among those in Tscharyiski’s generation: “The identitarians of the right and the left have been very successfully draining society of its social consciousness and replacing class with sex, national sentiment, or other vague concepts. This is in the end a neoliberal principle, even if it believes itself to be emancipatory.”<sup>78</sup> One doesn’t need to agree with Decker’s conclusion to see that the difference between generations he draws is correct, and notable.

There is an attempt at moral education happening in this *Mother*, much more similar to US American-style social justice than is typical of German theatre. As Tscharyiski said in the *Morgenpost*: “We belong to education.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, while the production and its marketing made claims to revolution, it also showed a deep discomfort with actually overturning systems. Tscharyiski, in her #BEempowered video, talked about fighting for democracy against fascism,<sup>80</sup> and in the *Morgenpost* interview said: “It can come to forms of radicalization, which represent a danger for society.”<sup>81</sup> While the designers built their scenography from crypto memes, I had no idea how the production stood in relation to cryptocurrency politically: Is it an antifascist liberatory force for the precariat, or a new way of oppressing them? Should we work within the political system to regulate crypto, or should we be using crypto to secede from our governments? If there’s a revolution being called for in *The Mother*, it’s personal, not political. In a promotional video, Tscharyiski said, “I ultimately believe that theatre cannot make politics, politics has to be made by politicians, but [theatre] can [. . .] prominently display a social phenomenon and it can tackle a current issue, making it more visible and leading perhaps toward a just world.”<sup>82</sup> The point is to create a more just or equitable world by revising the morality of individuals. Taken in its entirety, *The Mother* was moralist theatre with political content.

## Theatrical Events

Just as important for understanding the Berliner Ensemble as a less political theatre are the *fünfte Sparte* (fifth division) events there. “In Germany,” Christopher Balme writes, “theatres are increasingly being used to hold lectures, organize discussions, and host conferences, activities more familiar in the academy or on (public) television.”<sup>83</sup> Drama, opera, dance, and children’s theatre typically make up the four divisions of the German public theatre; these “fifth division” events, which Balme calls “postfictional,” increasingly contribute to programming. In fact, Balme writes: “This

area of theatrical activity is now second only to drama in the German subsidized theatre system.”<sup>84</sup> At the Berliner Ensemble, nontheatre events are listed on the *Spielplan*—the monthly calendar of performances—and take place in a variety of spaces, from the Großes Haus (their largest stage), to rehearsal rooms, to Bertolt-Brecht-Platz in front of the theatre, to the interior courtyard garden. Generally sponsored by outside funders and grant organizations, as opposed to being funded through the main subsidy the Berliner Ensemble receives from Berlin, the events are free or low cost.

Many of the events are organized by the Abteilung Einblicke (The Insight Department, a play on words), which sees its mission as creating “encounters in the theatre and through theatre: encounters with stories, aesthetics, generations, visual habits, opinions, concepts, humor, biographies.”<sup>85</sup> Though operating out of the theatre pedagogy department (with one staff member doing a *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr*, roughly the equivalent of AmeriCorps in the United States), it is incorrect to think of the Abteilung Einblicke as applied theatre. There is a difficult to translate word in German to describe the kind of theatrical activity in which Abteilung Einblicke engages, activity that finds itself somewhere amid pedagogy, dramaturgy, and aesthetic production: *Vermittlung*, which means “mediation,” and describes the role of someone who works between a cultural institution and society (Fig. 4).<sup>86</sup>

Abteilung Einblicke does not organize events just intended for children or people with specific needs, as often happens with applied theatre in the United States, though they do design workshops for schoolchildren. Instead, most of the workshops are advertised to anyone who might be interested, serving small groups of about twenty to thirty people at a time. Events range from simple, common audience engagement efforts such as backstage tours, to workshops on acting techniques, explorations of themes around productions using theatre games, and even performances like “Brecht to Go,” which is subtitled “an enacted audio-workshop.”<sup>87</sup> The events are best understood not as informational or postfictional, as Balme claims, but rather as extensions of onstage theatrical activity: into the corners of the institution, for audience members who want more than just to watch Stefanie Reinsperger in the BE’s production of Elfriede Jelinek’s *Schwarzwasser* (*Blackwater*, directed by Tscharyiski, 2021), and who also want to see how Jelinek’s text feels and sounds when they speak and enact it.

Is there a way of thinking about Abteilung Einblicke as producing *Lehrstücke*, theatrical events without audiences, or for which the audience makes the event happen? Often no: the workshops primarily offer aesthetic exploration, missing the revolutionary political lesson that is the purpose of *The Measures Taken* or *Was kostet das Eisen* (*How Much Is Your Iron?*, 1939): “We explore both content-related questions and artistic forms, and closely analyze figures as well as individual themes.”<sup>88</sup> And the workshops are not meant as reproducible experiments: the BE does not offer instructions to other theatre makers, along the lines of a script or notebook, and the workshops are tied to specific productions. So they fall more under the rubric of audience development or marketing, rather than the kind of theatre-as-community engagement of Brecht. Still, some of the workshops could be understood as small-scale, ethicized *Lehrstücke*. For the workshops around *Phaedra’s Love*, for example, participants discussed with each other issues around gender and violence,<sup>89</sup> seeking to make interventions in their personal lives (rather than researching systemic, political changes).



**Figure 4.** From Berliner Ensemble's "multigenerational theatre workshop" for *It's Britney, Bitch!* (by Lena Brasch and Sina Martens, 2022) and *Möwe* ([Seagull], by Lili Eppl, Sarah Viktoria Frick, and Anne Kulbatzki, 2022). Photo: © JR Berliner Ensemble.

According to Mona Wahba, who has led the Abteilung Einblicke since 2022, the overall goal of these events and workshops is not primarily political, but rather to bring people in dialogue, to let them play together and experience the feeling of being onstage and being watched by an audience. For the workshops tied to *The Mother*, she said: "Depending on the participants and their questions and topics the focus of the workshops may vary. Nevertheless our starting point is always the respective play. Regarding *The Mother*, we dealt with questions around resistance, activism, and gender."<sup>90</sup> The division also works broadly on such social justice themes. Wahba told me that the Abteilung Einblicke intends to help audiences feel more represented, asking (both through statistical analysis and open conversations): For whom exactly are we making performances, and with whom?

I want to emphasize that the BE today, under Reese, may often take up political themes in its fifth division and sometimes even hosts politicians on its stage, but the institution does not *politicize* the events. They focus more often on the individual than on social organization, asking questions about aesthetics and justice that do not demand systemic change. They do not generate a political dialectic, in the Marxist sense of the word, which implies ongoing process.

### An Ethicized Theatre

What are the consequences of this shift away from politics and toward ethics both for making theatre and for thinking about theatre? I do not believe the shift marks a failure to engage with the world or to try to change it, though that does sometimes

happen. Nor does ethical theatre necessarily equate with moralizing or lecturing audiences on personal behavior, though again, that can happen. What we have seen at the Berliner Ensemble illustrates how the values of German theatre more broadly are changing. The BE is increasingly oriented toward a cosmopolitan cultural elite (as with Kosky's *Threepenny Opera*), toward social justice (as with Tscharyiski's *The Mother*), toward audience development (as with the Abteilung Einglicke events), and toward care (as with the "Content Notes"). There is also room for darkness and satire of these same values (as with *Fabian* and *The Man Outside*).

There remains one extraordinary example from the 2021–2 season of a production that showed the aesthetic and philosophical potential of an *ethicized* theatre, that is to say, a theatre that thinks actively and dialectically about ethics, that uses "ethics" as a verb, similarly to how Brecht used "politics" as a verb: *Berlau*, by Raum + Zeit.<sup>91</sup>

For *Berlau*, which premiered in the Berliner Ensemble's flexible, black-box Werkraum in May 2022, individual audience members themselves embodied Ruth Berlau and confronted three more embodiments of Ruth Berlau.<sup>92</sup> Born in 1906, Berlau was a Danish actress and artist who met Brecht in 1933; later, they became lovers, and even after their intimate relationship ended, they collaborated on and off for the rest of Brecht's life. She became a skilled photographer and developed the modelbook form, first in Copenhagen in the mid-1930s, and then with Brecht in the United States and Berlin in the 1940s. At the Berliner Ensemble, Berlau "assumed special responsibility for matters visual and pictorial, gathered and archived pictorial material and sources, and edited and prepared for publication the four *Modelbooks*."<sup>93</sup> In Raum + Zeit's interactive tour of her life, relationship with Brecht, and artistry, one form of embodiment took place through an Oculus headset, with the visitor blindfolded by the headset and sitting quietly in a chair, addressed as Berlau. *Wake up*, a voice commanded. *You're dreaming. It's 1954. You're in Berlin*. Between experiences inside the headset, the visitor was moved through three small, enclosed rooms, where they confronted versions of Berlau performed by different live actresses. The visitor met the actresses, standing a couple of feet apart from them at most: first they encountered a middle-aged Berlau, after the early death of Michael, the infant son she had with Brecht in the United States; then a young Berlau, flirting with a Brecht that was the visitor; and finally an older Berlau, struggling with long-term alcoholism, shortly before her death in 1974 of a fire started by her cigarette in Berlin's Charité hospital. Within the Oculus, the visitor sat in the BE's auditorium, then walked about on its stage, encountering Brecht (played in the VR film by Martin Rentzsch). Guided by angels in black dresses with billowy upper arms almost like wings and faces covered by black masks, visitors moved from small room to virtual reality to small room, through a kind of station drama for one person at a time, until the dream ended (Fig. 5).

Something of a ghost story in content, something of a *Lehrstück* in its participatory presentation, and something of an epic drama in form, *Berlau* historicized the institution that produced it, showing that the BE developed in its early years from a particular set of social relations. But this historicization was not in the service of politics. *Berlau*'s main intertext was *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which the BE



**Figure 5.** An angel guide and a participant in *Berlau: Königreich der Geister* ([Berlau: kingdom of ghosts], by Raum + Zeit, 2022) at the Berliner Ensemble. Photo: © Matthias Horn.

produced, under Brecht's direction, and with Berlau's participation, in 1954—scenes from *Berlau* take place just before that 1954 premiere. *Chalk Circle* is a politicized play in which a theatre troupe puts on a play about motherhood—a child, named Michael, is fought over—in order to show that the true owner of land is the communist collective that can use the land most productively (as I described above). But Raum + Zeit referenced *Chalk Circle* to turn the visitor's attention back to questions of behavior: how parents should care for their children, lovers for their partners, and collaborators for each other, treating these relationships not primarily as economic but as personal.

Taken together, the content, presentation, and form of *Berlau* asked visitors to think ethically. As visitors proceeded through the stations of *Berlau*, they confronted the central questions and conflicts of ethics and performance, placed in the past in order to “invite audiences to confront them from unexplored angles”:<sup>94</sup> What should I value? What is justice? What is the goal of a (good) life? Of (good)

art? *Berlau* revealed *ethical relations*; Raum + Zeit *ethicized* the action onstage. Can artists today make amends to *Berlau's* restless ghost? To the BE's other ghosts? Was *Berlau* itself a form of redress? In one scene within the Oculus, the visitor confronted a Brecht who refused to care for the *Berlau* they embodied; as Brecht, they refused care to the actresses playing *Berlau*. Raum + Zeit showed how the command *be productive* came at great cost to *Berlau* and Michael. Judging Brecht's choices through the history of class struggle would be an excuse to ignore injustice: the gender relations of the 1940s and '50s, not just the period's economic context, clearly framed Brecht's cruelty.

At its best an ethicized theatre works toward justice and truth through theatre's aesthetic attributes, including beauty. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry argues that "beauty and truth are allied," though not identical:

It is not that a poem or a painting or a palm tree or a person is "true," but rather that it ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error. This liability to error, contestation, and plurality—for which "beauty" over the centuries has so often been belittled—has sometimes been cited as evidence of its falsehood and distance from "truth," when it is instead the case that our very aspiration for truth is its legacy.<sup>95</sup>

It was the experience of error, contestation, and plurality, this aspiration for truth, that I felt so strongly within *Berlau*.

*Berlau* intervened in the history of the Berliner Ensemble, refiguring its legacy to make it more personal, as well as more inclusive of Ruth *Berlau's* restless spirit, though she has always been there anyway. It achieved this form of justice, inspired in the visitor a desire for truth, through its aesthetic beauty. At the end of my visit, I found myself guided to a chair, the Oculus blindfold removed, the dream of *Berlau* over, even while the theatre continued. For these final ten minutes, as I sat in the chair, alone, unattended by the angel-death guides, observing other visitors moving through the stations (Fig. 6), I thought about *Berlau* as a person: the choices she made, her failures, and how she was failed, personally and professionally, by others, especially Brecht. I watched the actresses, through windows in the little wooden rooms, perform the same short scenes they had performed with me, and then watched them as they waited between visitors, and I thought about the power of their craft, and the energy it took to produce such power for each new visitor over several hours. I thought about the guides, how gentle they were with their near-helpless, blindfolded charges, as I watched them caring for others. And then I was taken out of the Werkraum, awakened again from the dream of a dream. Not for the first time after a performance, but in an especially poignant way, I thought about what makes a good life, as a father, a husband, a critic, a teacher. I walked out of the Neues Haus, across the quiet, dark courtyard, past the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, which was playing something that night, I don't recall what, the lobby bright and inviting, and then to my bike, chained to a tree in Bertolt-Brecht-Platz, which took me home through the night. I rode back to my life, my children, my wife, my work, and finally my bed: time again for sleep, and dreams.





**Figure 6.** (from left) Susanne Wolff (a middle-aged Ruth Berlau), an angel guide, and Amelie Willberg (a young Berlau) in *Berlau: Königreich der Geister*. Photo: © Matthias Horn.

## Endnotes

- 1 “Metropoltheater München setzt Inszenierung von Vögel ab,” *Nachtkritik* (18 November 2022), [www.nachtkritik.de/meldungen/metropoltheater-muenchen-reagiert-auf-antisemitismusvorwuerfe](http://www.nachtkritik.de/meldungen/metropoltheater-muenchen-reagiert-auf-antisemitismusvorwuerfe), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 2 See Janis El-Bira, “Das Spiel ist aus: Schauspielhaus Zürich beendet Vertrag mit Intendanten-Duo,” *Südwestrundfunk* (7 February 2023), <https://web.archive.org/web/20230216111642/www.swr.de/swr2/buehne/das-spiel-ist-aus-schauspielhaus-zuerich-beendet-den-vertrag-mit-der-intendanz-100.html> [archived], accessed 10 July 2023.
- 3 Theatertreffen 2023, “Über die 10 Treffen,” [www.berlinerfestspiele.de/theatertreffen/das-festival/archiv/ueber-die-10-treffen](http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/theatertreffen/das-festival/archiv/ueber-die-10-treffen), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 4 See, for example, Sophiensaele, “Content Notes,” <https://sophiensaele.com/de/seite/content-notes>, accessed 11 March 2024.
- 5 Typically “accessibility” is translated “Barrierefreiheit” in German, and “inclusion” is simply “Inklusion.” See, for example, Schauspiel Leipzig, “Inklusion—Barrierefreiheit,” [www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/inklusion/barrierefreiheit/](http://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/inklusion/barrierefreiheit/); and Schauspiel Leipzig, “Accessibility,” [www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/en/inclusion-en/accessibility/](http://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/en/inclusion-en/accessibility/), both accessed 11 March 2024.
- 6 See, for example, the consultant group Diversity Arts Culture, “Wie wir arbeiten,” <https://diversity-arts-culture.berlin/diversity-arts-culture/wie-wir-arbeiten>, accessed 10 September 2024.
- 7 Laura Bradley, “Brecht and Political Theatre,” in *Bertolt Brecht in Context*, ed. Stephen Brockmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 57–64, at 63.
- 8 David Barnett, *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 445.
- 9 Ibid., 62. See also Barnett’s discussion of “Making theatre politically” in *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 31–5.
- 10 Barnett, *History of the Berliner Ensemble*, 62.
- 11 Barnett, *Brecht in Practice*, 32.
- 12 Bradley, “Brecht and Political Theatre,” 60.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 62.
- 15 Barnett, *History of the Berliner Ensemble*, 437.
- 16 Ibid., 25.
- 17 See, for example, the modelbooks collected in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Performance*, ed. Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles, and Marc Silberman, trans. Charlotte Ryland et al. (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014).
- 18 George Hunka, “A Bookshelf of Brecht,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 38.2 (2016): 123–8, at 124–5.
- 19 Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. John Willett (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2001), 14.
- 20 Ibid., 20.
- 21 Markus Wessendorf, “Brecht’s Materialist Ethics between Confucianism and Marxism,” *Philosophy East & West* 66.1 (2016): 122–45, at 136.
- 22 Markus Wessendorf, “Brecht’s Ethics,” in *Bertolt Brecht in Context*, ed. Brockmann, 166–73, at 166.
- 23 Sonia Arribas, “The Subject Herr Keuner: Towards a Brechtian Ethics,” in *The Brecht Yearbook 35: Brecht/Marxism/Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), ed. Friedemann J. Weidauer, 2–23, at 9; italics in the original.
- 24 See *ibid.*, 7–9. Marx himself did not write explicitly about ethics, but it is easy to see, drawing broadly on Marx, how ethics, like religion, are a product of historical economic conditions as well as a tool used to oppress the proletariat and keep people from developing class consciousness.
- 25 Ibid., 9.
- 26 Wessendorf, “Brecht’s Materialist Ethics,” 137.
- 27 Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, trans. Carl R. Mueller, in “*The Measures Taken*” and *Other Lehrstücke* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), 7–34, at 33.
- 28 Bertolt Brecht, “To those born after,” in *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, trans. and ed. Tom Kuhn and David Constantine (New York: Norton, 2019), 734–6, at 736.
- 29 Wessendorf, “Brecht’s Materialist Ethics,” 129.
- 30 Quoted in *ibid.*, 135; italics in the original.

- 31 Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. Frank McGuinness (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), 116.
- 32 Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan), 44.
- 33 Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 1985), 109.
- 34 See Wessendorf, "Brecht's Materialist Ethics," 137.
- 35 Wessendorf, "Brecht's Ethics," 169.
- 36 Bertolt Brecht, *Messingkauf*, or *Buying Brass*, in *Brecht on Performance*, ed. Kuhn, Giles, and Silberman, 1–141, at 18.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 38 Bradley, "Brecht and Political Theatre," 58.
- 39 Brecht, *Messingkauf*, 42.
- 40 Barnett, *History of the Berliner Ensemble*, 437; italics in the original.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 445.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 448.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 Laura Bradley, "Contemporary Theatre? Brecht, Peymann & Co. at the Berliner Ensemble," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18.1 (2008): 69–79, at 74. Quoted in Barnett, *History of the Berliner Ensemble*, 448.
- 45 I am following Barnett's argument here, *History of the Berliner Ensemble*, 448: "In short, the BE is now another major theatre in Berlin that stages Brecht, amongst other playwrights."
- 46 Matt Cornish, "Singing in Dark Times: Report from Berlin," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 44.3 (2022): 3–17.
- 47 "Hinweise zu sensiblen Inhalten und körperlichen Triggern," [www.berliner-ensemble.de/content-note](http://www.berliner-ensemble.de/content-note), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 48 Amely Haag, dramaturg, in telephone discussion with the author, 28 June 2023; Mona Wahba, leader of Abteilung Einblicke, in Zoom discussion with the author, 4 October 2023.
- 49 "Das Verhandeln von gesellschaftlichen Konflikten ist diesem Theater eingeschrieben und kann erlebbar machen, dass und wie unsere Wirklichkeit gemacht, hergestellt—und deswegen auch veränderbar ist." "Hinweise."
- 50 "Je nach persönlicher Sensibilisierung können solche Auseinandersetzungen als (zu) schmerzhaft empfunden werden." *Ibid.*
- 51 For examples of BE marketing from the first forty years of its existence, including the first logo by dramaturg and designer Peter Palitzsch, see *Die Plakate des Berliner Ensembles 1949–1989*, ed. Friedrich Dieckmann and Karl-Heinz Drescher (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1992).
- 52 Deutscher Bühnenverein, *Wer spielt was? 2021/22 Werkstatistik Deutschland, Österreich, Schweiz* (Köln: Die Deutsche Bühne, 2023), 89. There were additional productions that drew from materials originally written by Brecht, but I am counting only those directly credited to him.
- 53 Brecht was the sixth most produced playwright; he was ranked seventh for most performances, and sixth for highest audience numbers. *Ibid.*, 80.
- 54 All of the numbers relating to repertoire and ensemble are taken from my analysis of the Berliner Ensemble website in late June 2022, captured by the Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220623130712/https://www.berliner-ensemble.de/>, accessed 10 July 2023. The repertoire and ensemble of German public theatres shift through the year, as new productions appear and older or unsuccessful productions are dropped; sometimes old productions will also be brought back into the rep. I decided to choose late June because it was the end of the season, meaning that all new productions for the season had premiered by then. But choosing that late date did mean that a couple of older productions had been dropped from the repertoire, even though they were played during the 2021–2 season.
- 55 Though all of these directors have worked at other theatres—with Barrie Kosky and Frank Castorf especially known for the styles they developed as the leaders of the Komische Oper Berlin and the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz Berlin, respectively—the framing of their productions in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm and their stagings with members of the BE acting ensemble strongly influences how the productions generate meaning.
- 56 Notes from the performance on 4 May 2022.
- 57 Notes from performances on 16 October 2021 and 2 July 2022, as well as an audio recording of a preview available to registered press critics on the Berliner Ensemble website: [www.berliner-ensemble.de/downloads](http://www.berliner-ensemble.de/downloads), accessed 10 July 2023.

- 58 Joshua Barone, "Review: *The Threepenny Opera* Returns Home, Liberated," *New York Times*, 15 August 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/08/15/arts/music/berliner-ensemble-threepenny-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/15/arts/music/berliner-ensemble-threepenny-review.html), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 59 Notes from the performance on 22 May 2022.
- 60 Cornish, "Singing in Dark Times," 13.
- 61 Notes from the performance on 20 November 2021, in which the actor Jonathan Kempf was replaced by Andreas Döhler.
- 62 Notes from the performance on 9 December 2021, as well as an audio recording for registered press critics.
- 63 Notes from the performance on 22 April 2022, as well as an audio recording for registered press critics.
- 64 "Hätte es doch nur mehr Momente wie diesen gegeben." The translation back into English comes from Kane's original text: Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2001), 63–103, at 103.
- 65 Esther Slevogt for one, writing in *Nachtkritik*, criticized the lack of politicized context in Thalheimer's dehistoricized interpretation of the play. Slevogt, "Wohin sollen wir denn in dieser Welt?" *Nachtkritik* (26 March 2022), [https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=20793](https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20793), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 66 As Daphne Brookes writes: "Simone, in these performances ["Alabama Song" as well as "Pirate Jenny"], draws from the ideological crux of Brecht and Weill's repertoire to craft a poetics of sonic alienation as coruscating socio-political commentary." Daphne A. Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," *Callaloo* 34.1 (2011): 176–97, at 179.
- 67 Wessendorf, "Brecht's Ethics," 169.
- 68 Brecht, *Messingkauf*, 69.
- 69 Notes from the performance on 28 December 2021 and from a video, shared with me by the Berliner Ensemble, of the performance on 18 September 2021.
- 70 "[Außerdem] bin ich der Meinung, dass immer noch zu wenig Frauen am Theater arbeiten. Ich habe eine Möglichkeit, tollen Künstlerinnen Jobs zu verschaffen." Quoted in Volker Blech, "Der Einzelne empfindet Ohnmacht," *Berliner Morgenpost* (16 September 2021), [www.morgenpost.de/kultur/article233343481/Der-Einzelne-empfindet-Ohnmacht.html](http://www.morgenpost.de/kultur/article233343481/Der-Einzelne-empfindet-Ohnmacht.html), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 71 "Doch. Es gibt jawohl immer noch Sozialhinterlassenen." Per the BE video of the 18 September 2021 performance.
- 72 "Wofür kämpft ihr," Berliner Ensemble (7–8 October 2021), [www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTJ4uSwAt7Kr6qIXq1Pp167Yaabh1EP\\_p](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTJ4uSwAt7Kr6qIXq1Pp167Yaabh1EP_p), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 73 "... es geht wirklich um Empowerment." "Ermächtigt Euch!—Der Soundtrack zur Revolution in Brechts 'Die Mutter,'" *Berliner Ensemble* (7 October 2021), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=agrQIC04v9s&list=PLTJ4uSwAt7Ko-VkWavCzSxZZ2zRW\\_zyvb](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agrQIC04v9s&list=PLTJ4uSwAt7Ko-VkWavCzSxZZ2zRW_zyvb), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 74 See, for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition: "empowerment, n.," OED Online, [www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=empowerment](http://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=empowerment), accessed 25 September 2024.
- 75 "Es ist eine Geschichte der Selbstermächtigung." Quoted in Blech, "Der Einzelne empfindet Ohnmacht."
- 76 Gunnar Decker, "Baustelle Revolution," *Neues Deutschland* (22 September 2021), [www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1156845.berliner-ensemble-baustelle-revolution.html](http://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1156845.berliner-ensemble-baustelle-revolution.html), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 77 The colloquial word *Ballermann* denotes both a party beach vacation and the kind of young person who goes on a beach vacation for the parties: "... damals im unmittelbaren Schatten des Untergangs des sozialistischen Systems und inmitten einer geschichtsfreien Spaßkultur mit Loveparade und Ballermann-Flugreisen." Decker, "Baustelle Revolution."
- 78 "Die Identitären von rechts und links saugen gerade höchst erfolgreich der Gesellschaft ihr soziales Bewusstsein aus und ersetzen Klasse durch Geschlecht, Nationalgefühl oder andere nebulöse Dinge. Das aber ist, auch wenn es sich selbst für emanzipatorisch halten sollte, zuallererst Ausdruck eines neoliberalen Prinzips." Ibid.
- 79 "[W]ir gehören zur Bildung." Quoted in Blech, "Der Einzelne empfindet Ohnmacht."
- 80 "#BEempowered: Wofür kämpfst du?—Regisseurin Christina Tscharyiski," *Berliner Ensemble* (7 October 2021), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmXqZQmzSjw&list=PLTJ4uSwAt7Kr6qIXq1Pp167Yaabh1EP\\_p&index=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmXqZQmzSjw&list=PLTJ4uSwAt7Kr6qIXq1Pp167Yaabh1EP_p&index=1), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 81 "Dann kommt es zu Formen der Radikalisierung, was eine Gefahr für die Gesellschaft darstellt." Quoted in Blech, "Der Einzelne empfindet Ohnmacht."

- 82 “Ich denke letztendlich Politik kann Theater nicht machen, Politik muss Politiker machen, aber es [Theater] kann ein gesellschaftliches Phänomen sehr ausgestellt zeigen und es kann [. . .] ein aktuelles Thema aufgreifen, sichtbarer machen vielleicht für eine gerechte Welt.” “Ermächtigt Euch!”
- 83 Christopher Balme, “Postfictional Theatre, Institutional Aesthetics, and the German Theatrical Public Sphere,” *TDR* 67.2 (2023): 14–31, at 25.
- 84 Ibid. Balme is citing statistics published originally in *Nachtkritik*: Ulf Schmidt, “Auf dem Weg zum agilen Theater,” *Nachtkritik* (25 January 2014), [https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9072:debatte-um-die-zukunft-des-stadttheaters-viii-ulfschmidts-vortrag-zum-agilen-theater&catid=101&Itemid=84](https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9072:debatte-um-die-zukunft-des-stadttheaters-viii-ulfschmidts-vortrag-zum-agilen-theater&catid=101&Itemid=84), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 85 “EINBLICKE wollen Begegnungen schaffen im Theater und durch Theater. . . : Begegnungen von Geschichten, Ästhetiken, Generationen, Sehgewohnheiten, Meinungen, Auffassungen, Humor, Biografien.” “Einblicke: Wer wir sind,” [www.berliner-ensemble.de/die-abteilung-einblicke](http://www.berliner-ensemble.de/die-abteilung-einblicke), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 86 See *Kulturvermittlung—zwischen kultureller Bildung und Kulturmarketing: Eine Profession mit Zukunft*, ed. Birgit Mandel (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2005).
- 87 “Ein inszenierter Audioworkshop,” [www.berliner-ensemble.de/brechtthgo](http://www.berliner-ensemble.de/brechtthgo), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 88 “Wir erforschen inhaltliche Fragen genauso wie künstlerische Formen, lernen Figuren sowie einzelne Themenaspekte genauer kennen.” “Einblicke für Alle” [and click on “Einblicke: Workshop”], <https://web.archive.org/web/20230930122912/https://www.berliner-ensemble.de/einblicke-fuer-alle>, accessed 10 July 2023.
- 89 Mona Wahba, in Zoom discussion with the author, 4 October 2023.
- 90 Mona Wahba, in email correspondence with the author, 21 October 2024.
- 91 An independent theatre collective; for this project’s concept they credit Alexandra Althoff, Male Günther, Lothar Kittstein, and Bernhard Mikeska. See “Berlau :: Königreich der Geister,” [https://raumundzeit.art/portfolio\\_page/berlau-koenigreich-der-geister/](https://raumundzeit.art/portfolio_page/berlau-koenigreich-der-geister/), accessed 10 July 2023.
- 92 Notes from a performance on 2 June 2022.
- 93 Tom Kuhn, “Part Two: Modelbooks: Introduction,” in *Brecht on Performance*, ed. Kuhn, Giles, and Silberman, 143–50, at 144.
- 94 Wessendorf, “Brecht’s Materialist Ethics,” 123.
- 95 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 52–3.

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