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Source: *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec., 1991), pp. 491-505

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207978>

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# Brecht and the Mothers of Epic Theater

Iris Smith

Despite the growing criticism of Bertolt Brecht's use of women in the theater, it cannot be denied that the most prominent and interesting roles in his later plays are female. Not only did he have the incentive of writing for the extraordinarily talented actress, Helene Weigel; Brecht probably sensed as well that dilemmas facing women, as estranged and disenfranchised members of society, could articulate his own views. It remains for feminists to capitalize on their potential for gender studies.

## Concepts Crucial to Feminist Theater

What do feminist critics want of Brecht's theater? First, they find useful its techniques for rethinking artistic representations of self, and for engaging spectators in that process. Second, feminist critics are drawn to the redefinition of spectatorial pleasure implicit in these techniques. Unfortunately, this form of pleasure is not clearly spelled out in Brecht's theories, nor do his plays achieve it fully. Thus a feminist criticism needs to *adapt* Brecht's ideas, not just adopt them.

I am interested here in two theoretical moves: Brecht's attempt to read "across the feminine" and feminist critics' rewriting of this strategy. These moves are neither oppositional nor clearly complementary. As I will demonstrate, feminist critics must select carefully from Brecht's repertoire and, further, must adopt and adapt only those ideas which have the desired theatrical results: to foster a form of spectatorial pleasure that opens up feminist alternatives and works against the replication of sexual stereotypes. To this end, the most useful of Brecht's ideas is the "social gesture" (*Gestus*).

*Gestus* is essential to Brecht's theory of epic theater. In the 1920s Brecht developed an idea of theater that contrasted sharply with the still popular naturalistic drama and diverged substantially from the psychological preoccupations of expressionism. Brecht's theater would be "epic" rather than "dramatic," would not perpetuate dramatic illusion and spectatorial identification, but would encourage thoughtfulness and reasoned action in the audience. As Brecht noted in "The Modern Theatre Is

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the Epic Theatre" (1930), the spectator would be turned into an observer, "made to face something," specifically that "man [i]s a process" "alterable and able to alter."<sup>1</sup> Dramatic theater, on the other hand, reinforced the spectator's cultural assumptions and focused her attention on the outcome of the play rather than its course. Even at this date, when Brecht was in the early, enthusiastic stages of his Marxist studies, he envisioned epic theater as a distinctly political but not dogmatic enterprise—a cabaret for the mind. In fact, the image of the 1920s cabaret clings to epic theater: a smoke-filled room where spectators, sitting back or strolling around, comment freely on the action. Brecht's early plays, more radically experimental than works like *Mother Courage* (1939) or *Good Person of Szechwan* (1939–41), put pressure on audiences to "co-produce" meaning, or to recognize that the self is layered in illusions and to take control of those illusions.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a number of feminist critics have found in these earlier "performative" plays a premonition of postmodern deconstruction more useful to feminist theater than the "denotative" later plays, with their split subjects and clearer continuity of structure.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, for reasons which will become apparent in the course of this essay, I have chosen to deal with Brecht's later plays. While these "dialectical" plays do occasionally lend themselves to reactionary interpretation, feminist critics have often used Brechtian dialectic as an epistemological frame for defining or locating feminist audiences. Moreover, Brecht's early, clearly misogynistic stereotyping of female characters, chiefly recognizable by their victimization, shifted to a focus in later plays on a central female character whose struggle to avoid victimization became Brecht's chief concern.

Where does the social gesture fit into this scenario? *Gestus* is a moment demanding special attention. During this moment representation (mimesis) reveals itself to be imbedded in history and is simultaneously opened up to new interpretations. *Gestus* was first conceived in "the dark times" of the Fascists' rise to power in the 1930s, when Brecht and others felt it was necessary to undermine the seductive slogans and images of Fascist discourse. Thus, *Gestus* rests on a dialectics of subversion, as Brecht says:

Every artist knows that subject-matter in itself is in a sense somewhat banal, featureless, empty, and self-sufficient. It is only the social gest—criticism, craftiness, irony, propaganda, etc.—that breathes humanity into it. The pomp of the Fascists, taken at its face value, has a hollow gest, the gest of mere pomp, a featureless phenomenon: men strutting instead of walking, a certain stiffness, a lot of colour, self-conscious sticking out of chests, etc. All this could be the gest of some popular festivity, quite harmless, purely factual and therefore to be accepted. Only when the strutting takes place over corpses do we get the social gest of Fascism. This means that the artist has to adopt a definite attitude towards the fact of pomp; he cannot let it just speak only for itself, simply expressing it as the fact dictates.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Brecht on *Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 7.

<sup>2</sup>Discussed by Elizabeth Wright in *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation*. (London: Routledge, 1989), 110.

<sup>3</sup>Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 97.

<sup>4</sup>Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 105.

The “hollow gest,” the “featureless phenomenon” of Fascism, drew its power, as Brecht well knew, from the impression it gave of semiotic plenitude. Nazi images of motherhood were effective in reinforcing assumptions of Aryan purity, and in marrying the Nazis’ political and military objectives to Germans’ assumptions about self. Brecht’s *Gestus* was designed to empty this hollow sign of meaning—or, rather, to reveal the “real” meaning of the sign. By framing an image of motherhood which has assumed itself to be mimetic (i.e., truthful), Brecht questions the concept of motherhood itself. In the Berliner Ensemble’s postwar production of *Mother Courage* (1950), spectators saw the author’s attitude to conventional images of motherhood when the traveling saleswoman, Courage, mourns for her dead daughter. Katrin, the daughter, has sacrificed her life to save a nearby town from hostile forces. Her mother, normally her protector, returns too late from her buying and selling to prevent Katrin’s death. Courage is inconsolable. Yet, even in her grief she is a good businesswoman. Pulling out a generous sum of money for Katrin’s funeral, Courage thinks again and returns a few coins to her leather purse. “Motherhood,” spectators see, is embedded in economics; it comes easier to the *bourgeoise* who can afford it.

### The Need to Adapt *Gestus*: Pleasure and Coercion

Feminist critics have spotted the potential of Brechtian *Gestus* to undermine stereotypical representations of women. By means of *Gestus*, epic theater draws the spectator away from the well-made play, with its closed forms and consumer ideologies, breaking the play’s conventions open to view and leaving them open at the play’s conclusion. *Gestus* attempts to energize the spectator to continue the text outside the theater. This program would seem tailor-made for feminist theater.

However, all feminist theaters and theoreticians are not attracted to strategies like *Gestus*. In her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan outlines three currents in feminist theater: liberal, cultural, and materialist.<sup>5</sup> The first takes its principles from mainstream liberal humanism and adopts the structures and techniques of traditional theater in order to assimilate women into representation and improve their lot in society. Dolan provides Marsha Norman’s *’night, Mother* as an example of the liberal feminist desire to “universalize” the experience of women. *Gestus* is not a technique compatible with this goal; in fact, Dolan demonstrates quite convincingly that *’night, Mother* defeats its own humanist tendencies by offering its main character one road to self-determination: suicide. Neither the characters’ debate on suicide nor the play’s realist structure allows room for an innovative dialectic. Nor does the second type of feminist theater find *Gestus* useful: cultural feminism addresses itself to finding a female identity and set of experiences common to all women, a project which Dolan claims stops short of including women of color and lesbians, and ends by reinforcing the hegemony of white, heterosexual views. *Gestus*, according to Dolan, is useful only to those historicized, materialist projects which acknowledge

<sup>5</sup>Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988).

differences among women even as they acknowledge other differences.<sup>6</sup> She locates *Gestus* in the strategies of lesbian theater, in which the female body is re-framed, making cultural assumptions about women visible. This use of *Gestus* would seem to allow disenfranchised spectators and actors to develop new forms of spectatorial pleasure.<sup>7</sup>

To achieve these new pleasures, however, feminist theater must make changes in *Gestus* that will compensate for its origins in the largely gender-blind experimental theater of Brecht's time. As Heiner Müller notes, "It's treason to use Brecht without criticizing him."<sup>8</sup> The success of *Gestus* depends on the production's sensitivity to context and audiences. Today, experimental theater tends to fragment and disperse meaning, to underscore its arbitrariness through *cumulative* or redundant associations. This theater treats language, as well as dramatic structure and conflict, as mere formal features which can be concretized and moved about like plastic building toys. Perhaps for these reasons, materialist feminist theater is most successful when it adapts and combines *Gestus* with other techniques.

Some theorists have pointed out that Brecht's early plays (written in the 1920s) are the most "postmodern." While the later, better-known works are still often staged, the past fifteen years have also seen new versions of *Baal* (1918–19), *In the Jungle of Cities* (1922), and other lesser-known early pieces, in which, as Elizabeth Wright notes, the audience's experience is theatricalized in imaginative ways which she describes as "performative," a "dialectic gone wild."<sup>9</sup> Speaking of Pina Bausch's 1976 production of *Seven Deadly Sins* (first performed in 1933), Wright further notes that Bausch has drawn out the postmodern potential of the two Annas, one of whom sells herself for the other's profit. In Bausch's version Wright sees "a compulsive surrender of subjectivity in order to placate the Other," but this *Gestus* occurs without any overriding socio-political moral (*Fabel*) of the sort seen in Brecht's later plays.<sup>10</sup> *Gestus*, the momentary tableau, is not "tidied up" by virtue of being linked to a *Fabel* as it seems to be in *Mother Courage* or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944–45).<sup>11</sup> The two Annas of *Seven Deadly Sins* are refractory selves, not the two halves of a split subject. Brecht's early plays seem more "postmodern," says Wright, because they refract the very concept of self. Contemporary directors in experimental theater are much more interested in playing with this refracted, shifting self than in framing a recognizable, even conventional image, as Brecht's later plays tend to do. To please a materialist

<sup>6</sup>Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 8–9.

<sup>7</sup>Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18, initiated an extensive and continuing discussion of the gaze of the heterosexual male spectator, a gaze directed by the camera to objectified images of the female body. Mulvey is drawing on Lacan's theories of ego-formation, in which the "subject" finds himself defined by the "objects" within his view. Mulvey maintains that narrative cinema offers the object-woman to the male gaze for phallic consumption and ego-construction. Her article, however, does not address other gazes.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted by Carl Weber in Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. Carl Weber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), 18.

<sup>9</sup>Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 97, 104.

<sup>10</sup>Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 120.

<sup>11</sup>Wright, *Postmodern Brecht*, 16.

feminist spectator, these better known plays need radical alteration, an unhinging or multiplying of the mirror images upon which they rest.

Elin Diamond has developed a provocative "gestic criticism" which radicalizes Brecht for materialist feminism.<sup>12</sup> Removing *Gestus* from the context of Brecht's epic theories of the 1920s and 30s, Diamond remolds the term into a dialectic of gazes. Actor/subject, character, and spectator form a dialectical triangle in which the spectator may measure herself against new formulations of historicized gender.<sup>13</sup> This feminist approach is designed to resist appropriation of the female character into patriarchy. To borrow terminology from Diamond, the usual voyeuristic stance of Mulvey's male spectator is replaced by a "looking-ness" shared between actors and spectators of both genders.<sup>14</sup>

Diamond brings a semiotic dimension to her use of the psychoanalytic language of ego-formation. She suggests that despite its representational aesthetics, drawn from Marx, epic theater is at heart presentational, creating indexical signs that invite response and action. Similarly, in an earlier article on the Brechtian *Gestus* as "the index of an absent sign," I demonstrated that Brecht's materialist framing of the theatrical sign puts it within the larger context of the spectator's life.<sup>15</sup> The signifier should not give the impression of self-sufficiency or universality, as it does in much illusionist theater; instead, it should point to, even demand an absent sign, that of the spectator's lived response to the theater. In feminist terms, the spectator is not so much impelled to imitate what has been seen, or to find familiar images reassuring, as to act on the evidence that alternatives are available or possible. Iconicity, while it exists in such plays as *Mother Courage* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, often hinders the dialectic, for the lived stereotypes of gendered behavior are merely reproduced. I would now add that the crucial missing index is the feminist spectator's pleasure, a pleasure that will empower her to engage, passionately, precisely those gender roles she is trying to abandon. What seems to block this pleasure in such plays as *Mother Courage*, where we would expect new formulations of gender, is a traditional, perhaps even essentialist, mother/whore dichotomy that the ongoing dialectics of presentation has failed to address.

One of the first feminist critics of Brecht, Sara Lennox, points out that he often represents women as "demonstration objects," figures whose flatness is created not so much by the actress's demonstration of the character as by Brecht's appropriation of her to fulfill unquestioned models of natural or "appropriate" female behavior.<sup>16</sup> Diamond agrees that while in Brechtian theory "the subject's capacity to regress is suppressed" and a voyeuristic stance thereby discouraged, nonetheless a regression

<sup>12</sup>Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR* 32 (T-117, 1988): 82-94.

<sup>13</sup>Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 90.

<sup>14</sup>Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 89.

<sup>15</sup>Iris Smith, "Peirce on the Politics of Epic Theater," *Semiotics 1984* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 351-60.

<sup>16</sup>Sara Lennox, "Women in Brecht's Work," *New German Critique* 14 (Spring 1978): 83-96.

to stereotyped gender roles is not suppressed at all.<sup>17</sup> Brecht wants the spectator to be “passionately and pleurably engaged”; yet the pleasure of the feminist spectator is *not* engaged, for the body of the actress (as well as the actor) is subsumed in ready-made dichotomies. The pleasures of dialectic, of an appropriative synthesis, do not do justice to the complexities of gender encountered in daily life.

The crux of the problem is the representation of the mother’s desire. In *Mother Courage* (1939), *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944–45), *Good Person of Szechwan* (1939–41) and *The Mother* (1930–31), the female subject is identified as an asexual mother, or as a sexual being who willingly abandons her sexuality and self-definition for the sake of children. These characters’ social and economic positions are determined through their roles as mothers, and their sexual identities are correspondingly stunted. None of this can be explained by the flattening of dramatic character normally seen in Brecht’s epic theatre, for the sexual identities of male characters are not similarly foreshortened.

Julia Kristeva has described woman as “a being of folds” who is appropriated to male ideology through the feminine masochism of maternity: “Feminine perversion [*père-version*] is coiled up in the desire for law as desire for reproduction and continuity, it promotes feminine masochism to the rank of structure stabilizer (against its deviations); by assuring the mother that she may enter into an order that is above humans’ will it gives her her reward of pleasure. Such coded perversion, such close combat between maternal masochism and the law have been utilized by totalitarian powers of all times to bring women to their side, and, of course, they succeed easily.”<sup>18</sup> We find such a representation in Lillian Hellman’s wartime drama *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) which, as Vivian Patraha has pointed out, uses a female character (wife and mother) to drive home the need for personal sacrifice in order to defeat the Nazis.<sup>19</sup> Not only does she willingly relinquish control of her own life, but Hellman suggests that the mother will also sacrifice her children’s lives to the “cause.” Despite the moral dilemmas apparent in her position, the grip of wartime ideology is such that Hellman’s character is not divided against herself in any significant fashion. Of course, the “wartime” context merely heightens societal expectations already in place. Kristeva has called for an ethics for women which does not rely on the intermediary of children. I submit as well that we need one that does not hinge on the issue of motherhood.

Patraha also contrasts *Watch on the Rhine* with the more promising representation of motherhood in *Mother Courage*. Here a wartime ideology heightens the contradictions visible in the mother’s sacrifice of her children. Brecht did not intend *Courage* to be a familiar, sympathetic rendering of mother love; yet, audiences have empathized with her, admiring her spirit and resourcefulness, identifying with her persistent, if unsuccessful, defense of her family, and offering the explanation that,

<sup>17</sup>Diamond, “Brechtian Theory,” 88.

<sup>18</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 260.

<sup>19</sup>Vivian Patraha, “Lillian Hellman’s *Watch on the Rhine*: Realism, Gender, and Historical Crisis,” *Modern Drama* 32 (1989): 128–45.

if she just had not made the mistake of haggling too long over the price of her son's release, she could have saved both her son and her livelihood. In short, an audience expects from *Mother Courage* what it expects from Hellman's heroine, in that the audience connects the text to what Patrice Pavis calls the audience's "field of discourse," a "semiotic mechanism" more complicated than mere recognition.<sup>20</sup> In Kristeva's terms, the "being of folds" has been treated as a woman whose flaws merely make her more attractive. She is recuperated to tradition through the image of the divided self, the tortured conscience of the struggling hero. As the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare Festival's 1987 production of *Mother Courage* implied, unrecuperated elements can be glossed over (her sexual relations with the cook, for example, were only hinted at), or criticized as mere inconsistencies in the staging. For audiences comfortable within a patriarchal ideology, better that *Courage* should be a woman experiencing a "male" dilemma than to uncoil her frightening and unpredictable feminine folds.

But it must not be forgotten that neither Brecht nor the feminist critics are interested in addressing or describing audiences who wish to be anesthetized in the theater. The passionately and pleasurably engaged spectator will resist the mimetic pull of *Courage*, refusing to see her as that hegemonic, anesthetizing representation of motherhood. Feminists want to offer the disenfranchised spectator not just an opportunity to resist representation, but to rethink representation for her (and their) benefit. Elin Diamond looks to Derrida, among others, for strategies that can shift the dialectics of representation onto feminist ground. The power of the patriarchal subject can be undermined if the sign is invested with a tremor of uncertainty which will disturb the subject's voyeuristic gaze. Woman as the object of the gaze ("looked-at-ness") is to be recast as "looking-ness," another semiotic construction, but one that empowers the woman as a participant, giving and receiving gazes.

### **Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan*: The Divided Character is Not Enough**

For a play such as Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan* "looking-ness" offers promising strategies. As a parable, this play has often been deadened by a stereotypical presentation of its surface dialectics—good vs. evil, male vs. female, exploiter vs. exploited.<sup>21</sup> But Brecht did leave clues in numerous notes and drafts, which intimate that the play is constructed on the close interrelationship of economics and the ideology of romantic love: only the former, money, makes possible the latter.

<sup>20</sup>Patrice Pavis, "Production, Reception, and the Social Context," in *On Referring in Literature*, eds. Anna Whiteside and Michael Issacharoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 132.

<sup>21</sup>Written in 1939–41, *Good Person* had no "orthodox" production, i.e., none directed by Brecht himself. Moreover, during World War II Brecht had no access to the Zurich production directed by Leonard Steckel in 1943, and he played only a limited advisory role in Harry Buckwitz's 1952 staging in Frankfurt-am-Main. The Berliner Ensemble, Brecht's own company, was able to stage *Good Person*, but only after his death in 1956. For this reason we have no *Modelbuch* (collections of stills and commentary gathered by Brecht's assistants during the Ensemble's productions and published as records of those stagings) to supply clues to his intentions, nor is it likely that his staging would have played against these dualities.



In 1984, Travis Preston's production of *Good Person* at Indiana (Bloomington) made the most of this interrelationship, as it tested Brecht's late theater against new, non-dualistic ideas of spectating. Images of business and religion were constantly juxtaposed; a raised billboard center stage competed with a oversized wooden cross at stage left. Both images were self-conscious, broadly drawn and interrelated, in the Brechtian manner. The feminist gest, however, lay elsewhere—in the sexually split character, Shen Teh. According to Brecht's story line, the prostitute Shen Teh<sup>22</sup> is the one "good person" the gods have found in Szechwan. Given a large sum of cash by the gods, Shen Teh abandons prostitution and sets up a tobacco shop. A poor family moves in with her, taking advantage of Shen Teh's generosity. Soon she is caught between the demands of the people she befriends and the demands of her heart. It is easy, Brecht tells us, for Shen Teh to be good and difficult for her to learn evil. Reluctantly she invents a powerful cousin, Shui Ta, a man of wealth who can give her the respectability and financial security she needs. Here is the split self so common in Brecht's later plays.

The Indiana production followed Brecht's intentions, if not his directions, for this gestic double self by demonstrating the constructedness of Shui Ta. Here the feminist spectator found several pleasures, among them the moments when the "feminine" identity of Shen Teh emerged in the "masculine" behavior of her counterpart. Shui Ta's first appearance was quite shocking (Plate 1). The actress playing Shen Teh reappeared in a sharp, elegant black tuxedo, fedora and sunglasses. The cross-dressing was completed by bandages encasing her head, producing the powerful image of a supernatural enforcer—an eerie being of surfaces who can empower Shen Teh. As the man Shui Ta, Shen Teh builds a small tobacco empire, but her economic and social position is soon threatened by her involvement with a young flier, which results in pregnancy. Shen Teh's body becomes a complex signifier: Shui Ta's increasing girth, apparently due to wealth and appetite, conceals the illegitimate child. As an indexical sign, the visible pregnancy, transformed into the more "respectable" condition of prosperity and gluttony, politicizes what is normally iconic in the sign, a sentimental image of motherhood. At the moment when the feminist spectator grasps the sign and its meanings, her passion and pleasure are engaged. This is an instance in which the actress/character, the feminist spectator, and the theatrical sign work together to achieve the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement or "distanciation").

Significantly, Shen Teh can only be decisive, clear-sighted, powerful as Shui Ta. In his text and notes, Brecht makes it clear that he intended Shui Ta to be seen as a complex character in his own right. He ever refers to Shui Ta with male pronouns in the stage directions. Shui Ta becomes the play's central figure very quickly, always entering in full costume, a "finished" human figure. On the other hand, Brecht refers to Shen Teh throughout his notes as a female type, in this case "the whore." When Shen Teh leaves her profession, she is easily appropriated as a stereotype of the "angel of the slums," which makes her understandable, a sort of Mother Teresa, at once respected and exploited. Thus, Shen Teh's shifts between mother/angel and

<sup>22</sup>Played with nuance by Margaret Diaz-Padilla.

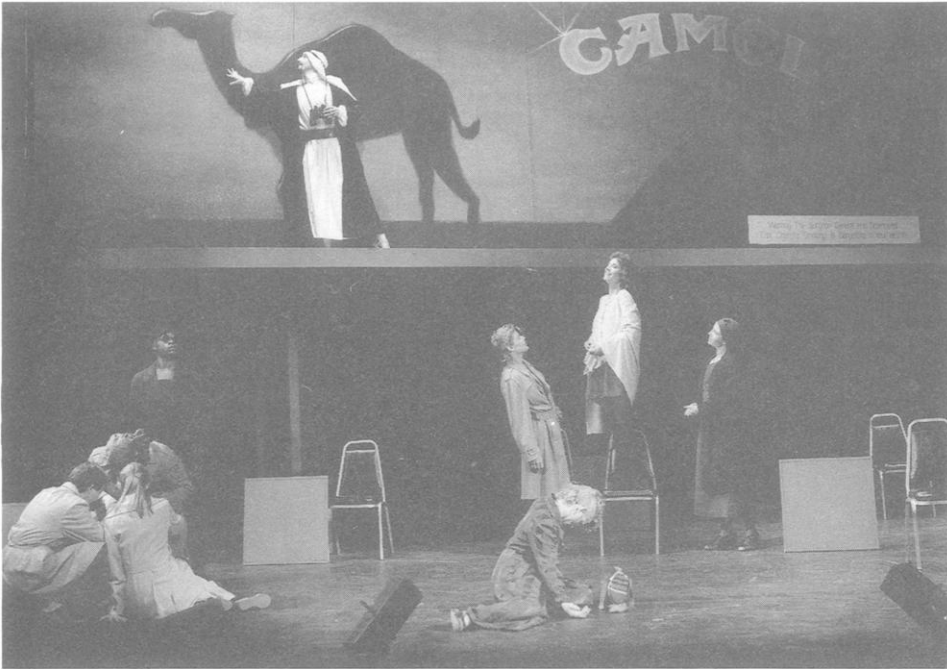


*The Good Person of Szechwan*, Indiana University Theatre. Margaret Diaz-Padilla as Shui Ta.  
(Photo: Indiana University Audio-Visual Center)

where become the reference points for a divided subject of familiar dimensions. Similarly, in later scenes, Shui Ta's imaginative exploitation of the workers is reduced to a conventional action: the mother protecting her child "as a tiger does its young" ("Zu dir / Will ich gut sein und Tiger und wildes Tier / Zu allen andern": Scene 7).<sup>23</sup> In this character who follows convention by sacrificing her moral purity for her lover and her "son," Brecht has clearly created a patriarchal image of the feminine (Plate 2).

To remain visible as an active subject, Shen Teh needs to break out of her "maternal instincts," which form a patriarchal, transparent cage of sexual "normalcy." In fact, Shen Teh/Shui Ta needs to be reformulated as a fragmented subject rather than a split subject. *Gestus* really begins with two people, interacting in a social dynamic, not within the tortured soul of the bourgeois individual. Shen Teh, like the Brechtian actor herself, must be a "master [sic] of meaning" who, as Roland Barthes puts it, is a subject seemingly full of knowledge who renders ideal meanings visible by "the

<sup>23</sup>Significantly, she calls her child "my little man." Brecht writes "*ein kleiner Mensch*," but the phrase is translated consistently as "little man" rather than "little person," and Shen Teh's other epithets—"son," "flier," and "conqueror"—bear out the translators' choice.



Below (clockwise from top): Margaret Diaz-Padilla as Shen Teh, Shannon O'Boyle as Mrs. Shin, James Ferguson as Wang, and Andrei Hartt as Yang Sun. Above: David Connolly as Shu Fu.  
(Photo: Indiana University Audio-Visual Center)

very excess of the versions [s]he gives it."<sup>24</sup> Shen Teh must exceed the sum of her parts, explode with excess and thus make of herself a subject-in-process. In epic theater, as in a postmodern context, there is no "whole" person. To be useful to Brecht or to feminist theory, character must display itself (at least in part) as a collection of signs. Thus, a 1990s production of *Good Person of Szechwan* must adapt, not adopt, Brecht's dialectics. All of Shen Teh's "folded" desires must be made visible, without turning her into a traditionally male subject, a self bound to logocentricity.

### Opening the Subject to Feminist Pleasures

The de-facing or effacing of Shen Teh shows most clearly how an imaginatively restructured production can revive and redefine the *Verfremdungseffekt* in feminist terms by making gender visible. Such a production does not seek to eliminate Brecht's dualistic framing of the problem in *Good Person of Szechwan*, but to disrupt it. When Shui Ta is seen on stage, the character Shen Teh is both absent and present. The director, Preston, pushed this ambiguity even further, for while Shen Teh's presence

<sup>24</sup>Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 75.

was hidden, the surface image called Shui Ta constituted no presence at all. Many spectators commented at the time on the eerie effect created by Shui Ta's bandage/face; they were able neither to accept Shui Ta as a whole, conventional character, nor to locate and distinguish Shen Teh from her disguise. The bandaging of Shen Teh's face combined with the figure's unnatural movements to create an effect, not a character. Shui Ta became a collection of gestures, his "face" an empty center which drew my reluctant gaze again and again. By preventing the (feminist) spectator from accepting that unsexed surface of bandages as the face of Shui Ta, the production tips the balance of the dual characters and begins to disperse their conventional sexual identities. Preston's production did not quite go the distance, for it only revealed *Shui Ta* as a construct, an empty center. A fully gender-conscious *Good Person* would find ways to unmask the character whose "simplicity" and "self-evident" goodness should make us suspicious: the ideology-bound Shen Teh.

The key to this problem is to rethink the dialectics of *Gestus* as an indeterminacy in signification rather than a kidnapping of conventional images for political ends. For *Good Person* this means recapturing the tremor of uncertainty in Brecht's earlier conception of Shen Teh. When Brecht manhandles such images, he also manhandles the feminist spectator. If *Gestus* is to be a site of multiple meanings or unlimited semiosis, then it must resist the appropriative synthesis that an epic gest, however complex, offers us. Otherwise, the text, the actor, the character, all are reinscribed in their pre-existing fields of discourse.

It may be helpful to look at *Die Ware Liebe* (*Love Is the Goods*, 1934) an earlier version of this play, consisting of five scenes set in Berlin. Of this version Brecht wrote: "A young prostitute realizes that she cannot be both goods and saleswoman. A stroke of luck puts a small sum of money in her way. She uses it to open a cigar store, and dresses as a man in order to pose as its proprietor, meanwhile continuing to practice as a prostitute."<sup>25</sup> Two elements of this scenario are striking. First, the process by which Shen Teh begins to understand her situation and to remedy it is made clearly visible; the summary suggests that her realization "that she cannot be both goods and saleswoman" will be staged. *Good Person*, on the other hand, submerges this realization in the *unseen* creation of the male figure, who seems to appear *sui generis* on the stage. At some point, perhaps in Scene 7, when Shen Teh has just promised her "son" the devotion of a "tiger," the costuming of Shui Ta could be done in full view of the audience. Shui Ta's eerie appearance would remain, while the mystery of Shen Teh as creator of the double role might be enhanced.

Such a staging appears in David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*. I am not referring to the scene in which the "female" character reveals herself to be a man, a scene which has its parallel in Shui Ta's "unmasking" in front of the gods. Both of these scenes contribute to a traditional dramatic sense of resolution. In *M. Butterfly*, however, that resolution is thwarted to an extent by the final scene, in which the "woman's" lover dresses himself on stage in her robes and makeup, and "becomes" both

<sup>25</sup>Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 6., ed. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Vintage, 1976), 375.

the beloved and Puccini's *Butterfly*. This scene has apparently had an unsettling impact on some spectators (although not necessarily feminists, who may tend to see Gallimard/*Butterfly*'s suicide as a return to a patriarchal fetish for patterns of female self-destruction). The layering of subjects witnessed in *M. Butterfly* keeps the lover's character within established sexual roles, although the spectator sees him abandoning one for another. What pleasure does the feminist spectator gain from this? Any staging of Shen Teh's transformation into Shui Ta would have to avoid such a "normative" reading of sexual roles. The visible layering of subjects adopted in *M. Butterfly*, like the *Indiana Good Person*, does not dislodge the patriarchal subject from the emotional center of the play. It merely shows a character advancing into delusion.

To make Shen Teh interesting for feminist theater, an impending sense of her character is needed—an index of a hidden subject, rather than the empty sign, Shui Ta. The production inscribes the play into the feminist spectator's field of discourse, to paraphrase Pavis, by answering her desire to see represented some aspect of the subject she considers herself to be.<sup>26</sup> How can this be done? Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte suggest: "When women on stage vocalize their experience as women rather than reflect the representation of them by men, the possibility for a new discourse arises . . . Yet what action could this subject play which would generate an alternative discourse, one constituted outside of the patriarchal codes? *The action of the desiring subject, the drama of the woman who desires*" (this and subsequent emphasis mine).<sup>27</sup> This desire could be foregrounded in the actor's playing of Shen Teh, if she expanded on the feminist possibilities of Brecht's early scenario, in which Shen Teh continues to sell herself even when not forced to do so.

Case and Forte focus specifically on the actor and the playwright, each working out her "self" through representations of desire. Case and Forte do not position the feminist spectator explicitly, only implicitly. Elin Diamond, on the other hand, says specifically that Brecht's theory offers feminist theatre a "'literarization' of the performance space to produce a spectator/reader who is not interpolated into ideology but is passionately and pleasurably engaged in observation and analysis." Feminist theater theory (unlike film theory) can offer "*a female body in representation that resists fetishization[,] and a viable position for the female [sic] spectator.*"<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Dolan's study, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* "recuperates the lesbian position from its desexualized stance in cultural feminism to suggest that *if lesbian sexual desire motivates narrative, the lesbian spectator may be able to find a subject position vis-à-vis lesbian representation.* The lesbian model of alternative spectatorship might hold clues to developing a more tenable position for feminist spectators of any ideological persuasion."<sup>29</sup> Lesbian desire also forms the basis of what Case calls "a butch-femme aesthetic." The power of this "*coupled subject*" is grounded in the semiosis of seduction. Together, she says, the butch and femme use high-camp wit to turn realism—the male gaze and the

<sup>26</sup>Pavis, "Production," 132.

<sup>27</sup>Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte, "From Formalism to Feminism," *Theater* 16 (1985): 65.

<sup>28</sup>Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 83.

<sup>29</sup>Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 16–17.

female body—into “sex toys,” signifiers charged with sexual ironies.<sup>30</sup> The play re-engages the spectator in free association, which realism has repressed. Thus the coupled subject reattaches the feminist spectator’s head to her own body.

Although each of these theorists calls for a new theatrical discourse, none of them explicitly questions the need for the centrality of the subject. Nor, if a reader looks closely, does any of them define or question the term “representation” in a thoroughgoing manner (although Diamond and Case come closest). Dolan and Case and Forte suggest that desiring and desirable behaviors can be *modeled* on the stage, so that the feminist spectator can find herself there (the pleasure of recognition) and project herself into the future (perhaps the pleasures of wonder and anticipation?). These practices seem indeterminate and open, but I am troubled by the often uninterrogated use of the term “modeling.” To offer a truly gestic pleasure, doesn’t the event have to decenter the subject, engaging the spectator with the text, not the character, and multiplying the types of pleasure it offers? It is Brecht’s “aesthetics of pleasure” that is most overlooked and that most needs to be resurrected here.<sup>31</sup> As Barthes remarks, the pleasurable text reveals itself as “a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites.”<sup>32</sup> This body is not the character, the split subject (which is elsewhere or nowhere). The spectator/reader’s pleasure (bliss or *jouissance*) is aroused by a figuration, not a representation, of the “materialist subject,”<sup>33</sup> for the erotic sites of that body will leap out from the frame of representation, just as the materialist feminist spectator wants them to.

Barthes’s development of these ideas in *The Pleasure of the Text* is an instance of such an eroticized move. In its pages the reader witnesses the “materialist subject” (and it would not be amiss to add “the materialist feminist subject”) pleasurably weaving or entangling herself in the tissue of that text/body. Barthes sketches out two shifts in modernity that have led to this postmodern, implicatory view of the subject: from the “old psychological path” of excavating the subject’s illusions to the split subject, “a pure alternation . . . of zero and of its effacement,” which Brecht has created in *Good Person*; and from that stance to the subject as process, as becoming, as the “multiple soul.”<sup>34</sup> Rather than the first two, this latest (not final) subject is the eroticized body/text which the feminist stage needs to “figure.”

Three points of correspondence clarify this move to the eroticized body/text. First, the body/text is political in its eroticization. In that it desires the spectator, the body/text achieves what Diamond has called “looking-ness” in materialist feminist theater. Rather than the actor/character being the object of the male spectator’s gaze, gazes are exchanged among spectator, actor, and character. This exchange can be decentered further by suggesting that it is the performance or play (the signifier) that exchanges

<sup>30</sup>Sue-Ellen Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women’s Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 297.

<sup>31</sup>Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 59.

<sup>32</sup>Barthes, *Pleasure*, 56.

<sup>33</sup>Barthes, *Pleasure*, 61.

<sup>34</sup>Barthes, *Pleasure*, 61.

gazes with the spectator. Or, to put it in terms of the voice, as both Barthes and Case and Forte do, the anonymous body of the actor or “the grain of the voice” is “thrown into the spectator’s ear.”<sup>35</sup> The bliss of that moment is both practical and contemplative, emotional and rational, as Brecht’s theory implies for the social gesture.

Second, as a decentered subject, feminist theater is schizophrenic in the sense intended by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus*.<sup>36</sup> Theorizing from Marx and Nietzsche, they see the schizophrenic as the body/text that expands to fill the universe. Breaking down the distinction between natural and artificial (exactly what materialist feminism has called for), Deleuze and Guattari see the schizophrenic as the recuperation of the patient lying on Freud’s couch: this body/text is active, “taking a stroll.” The “desiring machines” of this body/text expand it through the binary connection of (to take just one example) breast to mouth:

Not man as the king of creation, but rather as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of beings, who is responsible for even the stars and animal life, and who ceaselessly plugs an organ-machine into an energy-machine, a tree into his body, a breast into his mouth, the sun into his asshole: the eternal custodian of the machines of the universe. This is the second meaning of process as we use the term: man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other—not even in the sense of bipolar opposites within a relationship of causation, ideation, or expression (cause and effect, subject and object, etc.): rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product.<sup>37</sup>

While the language here is tinged with patriarchy, particularly in the objectionable use of the term “man,” only cultural feminists will object, I think, to the questioning of the distinctions between men and women, or nature and culture. If a materialist feminism applies this redistribution of opposites to Shen Teh and Shui Ta, her “natural” goodness is plugged directly into Shui Ta’s tobacco industry; the god’s kiss transfers Judas’s thirty pieces of silver to Shen Teh’s account; Shui Ta becomes Shen Teh’s opportunity to “take her goodness on a stroll.” The schizophrenic, after all, is not a split subject (just as schizophrenia is not a case of double or multiple personality); instead, the schizophrenic is the producer/product, the body/text that desires.

Thus, feminist theater should not choose among options, but multiply its binary couplings *ad infinitum*. At this third point of correspondence feminist theater needs to go beyond Brecht’s “not, but” (the trace of the subject’s options, visible in her actions) and embrace the “and” of excess, of schizophrenia. What does this mean for the feminist staging of *Good Person of Szechwan*? A series of images: Shen Teh as rhizome, fragments of her image peering out of the billboard at the audience. Shen Teh reappearing on stage; each time her skirt shorter, the cross around her neck larger, heavier. Bits of Shui Ta seeming to “stick” to Shen Teh: a single pants leg

<sup>35</sup>See Barthes, *Pleasure*, 67.

<sup>36</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>37</sup>Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 4–5.

appearing under the skirt. Woman struggling (not) to become The Fly. The Fly in terror of becoming Something Else.

Perhaps one answer might be to adopt the media techniques of groups like Mabou Mines, who play risky but often successful games with fragmented, layered images and "shaggy codes," as Sylvère Lotringer calls them.<sup>38</sup> Just as the non-character "Rose" in *The Shaggy Dog Animation* is not a "who" but a "how," so Shen Teh is a producer/product who only signifies meaningfully for the feminist spectator if she reveals the desiring machines of her body/text.

For lesbian audiences, this re-radicalized but still heterosexual *Good Person of Szechwan* might not offer more than a decentering of the subject. Brecht did not concern himself with sexually disenfranchised groups, and it may be simplest to write new plays for these audiences rather than radicalizing old ones. Still, a new production can find in this play's moments of excess the wit to recast modernist, Marxist class issues into postmodern gender/class/race issues. In any case, it is imperative to explore the pleasures offered by Brecht's plays to *heterogeneous* audiences, that is, a variety of spectators whose pleasures go beyond those anticipated in Brecht's theories, or indeed beyond the materialist feminist pleasures outlined here. Audiences today still include Mulvey's scopophilic viewer, perhaps trying to rid himself of his scopophilia (and who of us is not a recovering scopophiliac?). They include the feminist spectator who leaves the conventional theater in frustration and "goes off to develop a theory of feminist performance criticism."<sup>39</sup> But there are other pleasures by which spectators enter and leave the text. Disenfranchised audiences may already be applying as yet undiscussed strategies of resistance and rewriting. Such strategies have been documented in studies of the public's reception of films, popular novels and television programs. Is it not time to ask how audiences apply these strategies to what they experience in the theater? The spectator is at once a variety of subjects, some of which are active, others of which are repressed. The body/text of the theater must be redefined to speak to all of the people we are.

<sup>38</sup>Sylvère Lotringer, "Trans-Semiotic Analysis: Shaggy Codes," *TDR* 22 (T-79, 1979): 87-94.

<sup>39</sup>Dolan, *Feminist Critic*, 3.

Thanks are offered to Thais Morgan, Mary Lamb and Hans Fischer, whose keen questions and comments have teased out any clarity this article may have, and to staff members of the Department of Theatre and Drama at Indiana University, who assisted me in gathering material on their 1984 production, *Good Woman of Szechwan*.