Neher and Brecht

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What follows is a selection from Mr. Melchinger's introductory essay to the book Caspar Neher (Hannover: Friedrich Verlag, 1966); we have taken from the essay only those parts which bear directly on Neher's designs for Brecht's work. The illustrations come from the same book, and we regret deeply that they could not have been reproduced here in color.—Ed.

Augsburg

Brecht sang songs and played the lute. Neher painted pictures. With their friends they called themselves the clique of the outcasts.

The conservative mood was in full flower. In the Augsburg municipal theatre, where, to judge by Brecht's criticism, the "great classics" were performed, one could experience the unbroken might of a reactionary tendency for which no revolution had taken place. These performances had the sort of "plaster monumentality" which still gave Brecht the shivers 30 years later. Pathos oozed from stuffed shirts. Few people still believed that the theatre was a temple of beauty, but for many it was still an institution of moral uplift. The art student Neher saw the ideals of the old academicians in the sets: pompous colors, pretentious romantic forms, idealized landscapes with classic or gothic architecture, the perspectives of two-dimensional illusionism with flats, screens, and hanging panels.

On top of this reactionary stratum, there was a more recent layer, equally rotten: perfect naturalism. The traditional repertoire had washed up onto the stage pieces which had been revolutionary 30 years before, when they began to build rooms with real walls and real ceilings. These rooms were equipped with real furniture, which was supposed to provoke real admiration, not for its beauty but for its fidelity to the real milieu. The veracity of the stage was judged according to the sum total of genuine details. With time, the naturalistically clipped delivery of the actors had been replaced by a sonorous sing-song which decomposed heroic pathos into delicate soul searching. People who saw this sort of theatre in its decline were provoked to life-long aggressive dislike.

But the sharpest hostility of which the young people were then capable was directed against the third stratum: Expressionism. By 1920 it had already begun to fade into history; people had had enough of it. A reaction against these screamed proclamations of universal brotherhood was inevitable in view of the disappointment at the failure of the [Spartacist] revolution and everything connected with it. In June 1918, Brecht wrote to Neher, who was at the front:

This expressionism is awful. All feeling for the beauty of a curvaceous, magnificently simple body is withering away like the hope for peace. All along the line spirituality is conquering vitality. Mysticism, spiritualism, consumption, blown-up ecstasy are getting out of hand and every-

The Seven Deadly Sins, Théâtre des Champs Élysées, Paris, 1933.
thing stinks of garlic. They are going to kick me out of this ideal, noble, spiritual heaven, out from among these Strindhills and Wedebabies, and I'll have to write books about your art.

They had no idea how much they had quietly adopted from the expressionist stage revolution, in which anti-illusionism was already a normal element, and was on the way to becoming another convention, and was for that reason alone already suspect to these sworn anarchists. The bent lanterns which appeared in all street scenes (including the set by Reigbert for Drums in the Night) had become a cliché. When Brecht was later asked what influences there had been on his work, he used to say, "There weren't any in Augsburg at the time." Neher may have heard of Craig, Appia, and the Russians, but in his early sheets we find no traces of them. However, some of the most important postulates of the "epic" theatre belong among the commonplaces of expressionism: for example, the elimination of the ramp, the built-up stage versus illusionistic painted sets, de-illusionment for the purpose of maintaining theatrical consciousness—not to speak of the discovery of the potentialities of lighting (Bablet writes, "Appia was the first to understand that lighting is an indirect means for completing, modifying or creating a set through the use of projections").

Yet, finally, neither Neher nor Brecht was ever an Expressionist or symbolist (which in the theatre of those days usually meant the same thing). Brecht wrote of Neher:

In his work, there is no house, no court or workshop or garden, which does not, so to speak, still carry the fingerprints of the people who lived there or worked there. Our friend begins in his sketches with people and with the things that happen to them and because of them. He does not do stage pictures, backgrounds and frameworks, but he constructs the landscape in which people experience life.

Drums in the Night

Neher's earliest drawings of theatrical themes date from 1922. The stage designer of the Munich Kammerspiele, Otto Reigbert, is sup-

Set Design for Drums in the Night, 1922, Picadilly Bar.
posed to have modelled his sets for the premiere of Brecht's *Drums in the Night* after sketches which Brecht supplied to the director, Otto Falkenberg; and these sketches were done by Brecht's childhood friend from Augsburg, Neher. But this cannot be quite exact. Photos of the production reveal the then customary expressionist style: zigzag houses, crooked walls, a stylized unreality. Neher's sketches reveal hardly a trace of such elements. Reigbert claimed to have followed Brecht's directions: "This comedy was performed in München in front of the following set: behind the six-foot-high cardboard screens which represented the walls of a room, the great city was painted on a flat in a childlike style." But the city was not at all painted in a childlike way—it was a poster whose stylish bizarreness was aimed at shocking the good bourgeoisie. Neher's scrappy sketches of the Picadilly Bar, with no city in the background, are a better example of what Brecht had in mind as "childlike style." Its primitivism was the residue of a world of images common to the two friends.

Brecht, incidentally, said later that the two-part division of the stage in Reigbert's set was Neher's invention; this is not the case. Such background paintings, usually conceived as symbolic commentary, are not rare in expressionist stage sets. They anticipate the projections which Piscator, among others, later used extensively. George Grosz, with whom Brecht argued in a foreword to *Drums*, made decisive contributions to this style; he did a set for Kaiser's popular play *Nebeneinander* (1923) which bears such an astonishing resemblance to Reigbert's *Drums* designs that Neher cannot possibly have invented the split stage which appears in both sets; this device belonged to the treasury of the expressionist stage.

Neher's *Drums* drawing shows Klee's influence strongly, and his technique reveals a high degree of sophistication. He held to it for many years: dissolving brush strokes on absorbent paper, washed-out color dots.

**Baal**

In the early summer of 1918—according to Münsterer, who was one of the clique—when Neher was on leave in Augsburg, he did nothing but draw Baal figures for Brecht: with and without guitar, sitting, standing, squatting, with a red jacket, fat, naked, or very much in rags.

*Set design for Baal, 1922, Dining room.*

That was how they liked to see themselves: tieless, sloppy, puffing on cigars, in low bars, at the fair—Villons *manqué*. One cannot say they loved only themselves. They loved Wedekind, for instance, especially when he played the guitar after midnight, and they mourned him when he died in 1918. Little from his plays turns up in Brecht's work. But in Berlin in 1926, Neher and Erich Engel did a *Lulu* which showed the phantoms of the 1890's floating above Baal's altars, and it may be that Neher got the idea for his sectioned walls and his transparent wings from Wedekind's theatre.

For the München *Baal*, Neher and Brecht designed the theatre of their dreams. The Expressionists patched symbols together; Neher painted blood, filth, cadavers. A theatre for smoking in, the boards representing a lousy world, the excrement and worms on it called human beings, a stink of hunger and misery, the voices of pimps, the sounds of cabaret jazz. A moritat at best, modelled on the clean moritat (literally: murder-deed) of war, with a failed revolution and inflation. Tattered (but not artfully so) costumes, furniture that fell apart, a paper lantern above it all. No illusions, and only such emotions as "every man is best in his own skin" or "soul = baloney." Neher painted an invisible horror for which Brecht's theatre could not or would not find words. In response to a fashionable and modern theatre: the theatre of grinning primitivism.

The Berlin production of *Baal* transformed this style into the classic image of itself. Above the ravings of the wild man there hung an "estranging" mildness which one might consider
Verfremdungseffekt. Neher’s colors became wonderfully lustreless; for the rest of his life they called him “grey Neher.” But his grey, his dull brown, his off-yellow, his unnatural green—all are capable of many nuances, nothing is to be understood as a value in and of itself. It exists on stage as a foil for the actors. By the way, Baal was performed only as a matinee in Berlin—that sort of thing was no longer in good taste.

In the Jungle of Cities

This production provided a decisive encounter with Erich Engel. The waterfront-dive theatre was installed on the revolving stage, and primitivism linked hands with polished technology. Things for which Neher had only an instinctive yearning were transformed into matter-of-fact reality, and youthful improvisations were exchanged for the tight schedules of the mechanized workshop. Brecht said of Engel: “He can sniff out the problems that have been overcome.” That is, Engel, the architect and engineer of the stage, recognized the artistic content of the structures which were hidden underneath the sloppy pose of the Brechtian theatre. The new style was: wildness according to the rules, or, as Neher’s incredible prose sketch for the program expressed it, “Algebra with the witchdoctor.”

Edward II

Feuchtwanger advised Brecht to do Shakespeare. He was to begin rehearsals for Macbeth, and Neher was already painting the scenery, when they decided to do the Marlowe play instead. The now familiar style: half-length curtain, primitive dividers, and rag costumes—which Neher now painted onto the actors’ bodies. War had never before appeared on stage this way. “Slowly, mechanically, silently, terrifyingly tired, the ranks of the army emerged from the darkness” (Frank). Several people confirm Brecht’s account of a visit Karl Valentin made to one rehearsal: when the question was asked, “What do soldiers do in
battle?” he answered, “They are pale, they are scared.” Brecht and Neher promptly had the soldiers’ faces made up chalk white.

At this time (1924), Neher also designed a Berlin production of Coriolanus for Engel; ironically, Brecht, who was around, said to them: “I have given up all efforts to produce the classics.” But Neher and Engel were working toward epic theatre with this play, and building a bridge from the primitive theatre to the Elizabethan stage. The motion was ballad-like, the impetus aggressive: “The squares and streets seem to resemble the sites of our Spartacus uprising in 1919 more than they do the forum and Capitol of 493 B.C.” (Jacobsohn). It was radical actualization, a far cry from cheap updating.

A Man’s a Man

Gels, the director of A Man’s a Man, in Darmstadt, understood what “the chief” wanted: “Foreground as distinct as possible… no allusions, secrets, ambiguities, half-tones.” Concrete props: a child’s pagoda and a child’s cannon. The play was cut to the patterns of

Jungle of Cities, 1922, Chinese Hotel.
the Asiatic theatre. The soldiers on stilts were monsters representing the human quantity, and the poor bastard Galy was an empty slate rebuilt into a fighting machine. The epic theatre was still in its experimental, workshop stage. The half-length curtain was the last vestige of earlier primitivism, and thus passed into the catechism of Brechtology.

Five years later, Brecht changed the piece drastically for a Berlin performance, removing the sardonic, the scurrilous—the grin had vanished from their faces.

The Threepenny Opera

This was the zenith of Neher and Brecht's pre-war collaboration. According to Lenya's hurried sketch of the premiere, the whole clique—old members from Augsburg, new ones from Berlin—participated, and not one believed that it would be a success. Nobody, least of all Brecht himself, could understand the hysteria which swept Berlin and the nation. Here was a world that could be bought for three cents and was worth no more; a joke by people who had never worked with something that fit their style so perfectly.

Neher erected a gigantic circus calliope at the back of the stage and illuminated it for the moritat. He painted the scene titles on blotter paper in a child's scrawl, and threw in a cannibal's head whose derivation from Klee could be overlooked only by the innocent. Pieces of scenery were rolled on stage, raised from below, or lowered from above. Kerr: "The set changes took place vertically." But with what refinement the crude shock effects were staged, and how the audience in evening dress loved them! Weill's jazz score relied on the same mixture: "Such instrumental facility that not..."
only one's comfort but also one's last doubts about the insurrectionary rights of such utilitarian music disappeared" (Adorno). Insurrectionary? It had once been. What was left was sheer fun.

With the success of Threepenny, Neher and Brecht reached similar turning-points: it showed them that simply to shock would no longer do. Times had changed, they had grown up, their ventures had lost their originality. Brecht's decision is well-known. Neher did not follow him toward Communism; instead, in 1928, he accepted a job as production manager of the municipal theatres in Essen, where he remained four years, producing one play after another there and in Berlin, and doing as many operas as he wanted.

**Mahagonny**

*Mahagonny* had its premiere in Leipzig, 1930; at the end of 1931 Neher headed the directing team (Brecht even then directed in collaboration) for the Berlin premiere. He used projections (according to Brecht/Suhrkamp) as "an independent part of the opera, like Weill’s music and Brecht’s text." They represented a daring attempt to reduce the artistic world and the world of people to a common, forceful denominator; the sets "took up a position *vis à vis* the events on stage, so that the real glutton finds himself faced by the painted glutton." It is as if the stage independently acted out the things contained in the scenery. This all took place in a framework of Meyerholdian bareness.

**The Mother**

Neher designed for Brecht the 1932 staging of his adaptation of Gorky's *The Mother*. According to Hans Mayer, this production was the culmination of several years' progress toward "plebeian heroism" and the end of that particular path, which he had followed at the same time as, but in contradiction to, his work on *Mahagonny*. It "showed Marxism in action" and was "a conversion to the plebeian tradition." Neher's sketches exhibited the waterfront-dive theatre in the most ascetic form imaginable. This was the only time he used photographic projections. Brecht:

. . . A few indications
set the stage. Some tables and chairs.
The indispensable was enough. But the photographs
of the great enemies were projected onto
screens in the background.
And the sayings of the socialist classics
painted on cloth or projected on screens,
surrounded
the worried players . . .

Through these years, Neher grew away from Brecht in many ways. He wrote his own libretto for a Weill opera, *Die Burgschaft*. The more strenuously the theoretician of the "epic theatre" rejected and heaped scorn on the

The Threepenny Opera, *Theater am Schiffbauerdamm*, Berlin, 1928.
theatrical status quo, the more tranquilly Neher signed contracts with the latter's representatives. In 1933, Neher did not emigrate; throughout the War, he staged innumerable traditional plays and operas, lost his son on the Russian front, and was drafted in 1944.

Antigone

1947 reunited Neher and Brecht in Switzerland, and they did Antigone in the town of Chur. For this production, the importance of a note which Brecht wrote in 1929 for Jessner's production of the two parts of Oedipus Rex cannot be overestimated: "last stage: Oedipus. Important: the grand style." This shows the problem which the maturing pioneers of a new theatre had to face with ever greater urgency. Only the basic premise of the waterfront-bar theatre could be usefully retained: anti-illusionism. Primitivism had become invalid from the moment that it petrified into an attitude and came into conflict with personal experience: they had used it up.

In Antigone, the grand style was tried out in the smallest possible place. They no longer needed the half-length curtain or stylized crooked walls. Neher now had the experience of the open stage. They set up benches on stage in a semi-circle in order to embrace in one unified space the imaginary semi-circle of the audience on the other side. They placed the chorus, representing the people, in the stage half of the circle. Animal skulls were stuck on long poles, and barbarism stalked beneath them. Brecht wrote a prologue set among the ruins—"Berlin, April 1945." He had not experienced it or seen what it looked like; Neher told him.

The Berliner Ensemble

In 1949, Neher travelled to Berlin with Brecht. First they did The Tutor, as an etude for the purpose of trying out the principles Brecht had laid down in innumerable theoretical writings.

Antigone-Model
during his exile, but had never yet demonstrated on stage: the quintessence of the Messingkauf. They did Puntiila, then The Mother, decisively revised from the first version. Brecht: “In 1932 this work was performed more or less in the agitprop style, although it is really a historical piece. We now performed it in the latter mode, as the poetic representation of an already classical period…. In my judgment, the fact that this production strove for visual beauty did not detract from the realism of the play.” The projections were no longer photographic, but consisted of paintings.

The high point of their new collaboration was the opera Lucullus: I do not know whether the banning of this piece was related to the fact that Neher did not work again in East Berlin for five years. Coriolanus, for which sketches had been made, was cut off, and when they finally met again in 1956, to do Galileo, Brecht was already fatally ill.

In the Archives there is an instructive “Note on two conversations with Neher about Galileo.” At one point it says, sounding very much like a quote from Neher, “The stage, lightly constructed in the Italian manner, and recognizable as lightly constructed. Nothing stony, overwhelming, massive. No interiors.” Years later, Giorgio Strehler and Lucio Damiani in Milan took this point seriously. But in Berlin (1957), with Engel, the play was overwhelming, massive, with one single interior, a copper-lined gigantic box.

St. Joan

In contrast, the posthumous premiere of St. Joan of the Stockyards in Hamburg (1959) became an exemplary sample of Neher’s Brecht-stage in its third phase. This set may not have corresponded to the ideas of the Brechtologists, but then the play is not yet “epic” in a dogmatic sense; it leans on Shakespeare’s histories and is carried, ironically but with a certain congeniality, by the Shakespearean language. The events on which it was based (1929/1930 newspaper reports from Chicago) can be treated only historically. The piece therefore must be historicized, as Brecht himself demanded of productions of the classics.

The stage was transposed to the world of
Neher’s youth. Every bit of stage area was used including the bare walls. The basic outline was a result of the necessity for rapid scene changes, which could not be indicated merely symbolically. The play demanded variability as well as variations (e.g., for Joan’s three “descents into the depths”), and therefore the revolving stage was used. It was of course unconcealed; further, it was turned completely, in full view, before the opening scene—to give the audience an overview of the scenes and prevent subsequent turns from having special effect. Up to the last scene the lighting was dimmer than Brecht’s later plays call for—this world borders on darkest hell.

Around the revolve the stage was furnished with all possible means: panels, projections, props. Neher went back to Klee, painting hangers in surrealistic colors and forms, arranging them beneath and against each other, and varying their number from one to a multitude, so that some scenes resembled mosaics. Ironic visions of reality were projected on the proscenium, such as a classicist temple facade whose broken columns did not touch the ground. Street-lanterns, candelabra, a camp stove for frying the slaughterhouse king’s steak. Joan is driven into a blizzard, and the projected snowflakes seemed to rise from the stage floor: it snowed upwards. Metal plates flashed like signals when she heard voices. And the apotheosis scene was constructed like an altar, full of gold and tinsel, with an organ at its visual center. Yet this canonization was so unambiguously interpreted as an execution that its grim humor was the proper conclusion for a revisitation after Brecht’s death to the world of his youth.

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Set for Galileo.