AMERICAN THEATRE
JANUARY 2016 THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

Special Section
ACTING’S MIND/BODY DIVIDE
A Building Boom in Houston
Blanka Zizka Remakes the Wilma, Again
PLUS:
Dominique Morisseau, Mark Rylance
Brech From All Angles

Four new books show different sides and strengths of the German poet, playwright, theorist, and prose author

BRECHT WROTE MANY HATS: ARTISTIC
director, theorist, prose writer, director, and poet. But in Amer-

ica he is primarily known as a playwright. Yet Brecht scholar
Frank K. Bently has argued: "If there is a Brechtian quintes-
ence, you will find it there: in the poetry." There is no denying
that Brecht's poems—which number more than 2,000—have
the same metempsychotic power as do his plays, who, like his plays, they
gathered with a sensibility, encompassing geopolitics and the
barbarism of self-preservation.

In Bertolt Brecht: Love Poems, translators David Con-
stantine and Tim Kuhn curated 76 of Brecht's love poems,
covering the period from 1918 to 1933, just a year before his
death. In her foreword to this volume, Barbara Brecht Scholl,
Brecht's daughter, affirms what many already know: "Papa
loved women, many women." Brecht's amorous or libidinal
appetite was complex, particularly for women who were
friends, associates, lovers, and collaborators simultaneously.
There have been accusations that Brecht manipulated and often
used women, he also idolized and hyper-romanticized them.

Constantine and Kuhn's translations make those
poems admirably accessible. The translators validate Brecht's
technical virtuosity: "He works effectively in hexameters,
in right rhyming quatrains, sonnets, ballads, unrhyming verse
in regular meters, and in numerous other shapes and forms as
the poetic occasion demands." The technique matters less, of

course, than the excitement generated by the poems. While
none has the metaphoric force of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's
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Girl, they do pack their own unique poetic punch. They reg-
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Brecht In Practice: Theatre, Theory and
Performance by David Bergo. 3 Series Editors, Enoch Breder
and Mark Taylor-Betty. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London,
2015. 256 pp., $19.95 cloth, $29.96 paper.

Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and
Modelbooks by Bertolt Brecht. Edited by Tom Scharf,
Steve Gillis, and Marc Silberman, translations by Charlotte
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influences; we're left to wonder which, if any, were inspired
by his Baumbeler, the young girl who bore Brecht his first son.
Among other things, this collection ably makes the case that
Brecht's audience deserves to be wider than theatre enthusiasts.
Brecht's non-theatrical writing extended beyond poetry—

a point made by Marc Silberman in a new introduction to The
Collected Short Stories of Bertolt Brecht. "While best known
as a dramatic and poet, Brecht was first and foremost a prose
writer, more specifically a storyteller," Silberman writes.
Clearly this new edition endeavors to place Brecht in the select

group of other well-established playwrights/poets—John Mill-
ington Synge, William Butler Yeats, Langston Hughes—
who increased their creative stature via their prose writing.

The collection, first published in 1983, consists of 17 short
stories that demonstrate Brecht's talent as a prose stylist. They
are separated into three distinct periods: The first (The Bev-
rian Stories, 1920-1924) explores autobiographical themes for
a young man learning lessons about male contradition and
marriage, struggling to make sense of the randomness of life,
and searching for meaning in erotic paradoxes. "I am neither
a murdering rapist nor a matrimonial swindler. I am a lover,"
says a character in "A Man Bestial," who moves in with a
lovely widow and soon lives up to thea's title. It's not all
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Known in the U.S. Silliman notes that Ger-
man newspapers and journals of the time were
more interested in Brecht’s plays.

The second section (The Berlin Stories, 1924-1933) includes stories written before Bre-
ch’s rise to power; these have a gritty, hard-
 hitting, realistic appeal. Silliman notes that the stories were “pushed” by financial considerations as well as a commitment to the prose form as such. Business, banking, and bad behavior are the main thematic sub-
 stances here. A story about a crooked finan-
cier on the brink of bankruptcy, “A Little Tale of Insanity” aptly captures the desperate spirit of the times.

It is in the last section (Stories Written in Exile, 1931-1945) that Brecht puts forth stories in explicit resistance to fascism. “A Weir Socrates, Wounded,” as engaging as it is to read, picked up on an anagram, as Brecht becomes a
historical revisionist in retelling the tale of So-
cratic’s brewery curing a war battle.

Whether Brecht is negotiating rela-
tionships, factors of a character’s human-
ity, or offering an anthropological approach to displacement or alienation, there is always a superior literary talent at work. His plots, characterizations, style, and language in these short prose prove Silliman’s point. Among
other things, Brecht was a great and engag-
ing storyteller. I’d even go so far as to say that the Ariadne’s various shadowing in The Collected Short Stories of Bertolt Brecht are equal to his works for the stage.

Of course, many readers will approach Brecht’s prose writing and poems as byproducts of his theatre work. The latter is the focus of David Barnett’s Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance. He opens with the assertion that Brecht not only gained “an interna-
tional reputation as a playwright, he also
developed new ways of understanding theatre and new ways of making theatre as a director.”

Almost Constantine, Kuhn, and Silliman, Barnett frames Brecht firmly in the field of the
theatre, focusing on him both as a theo-
ratician and as a practitioner: Barnett uses Brecht in Practice to argue that Brecht, despite his
impossible and lasting reputation, is still very
much misunderstood.

Barnett starts from the foundation of
Brecht’s Marxist politics, wondering why the
subject is “so frequently left from refer-
ence to the Brechtian?” He argues that what
“defines Brecht’s contribution to the remak-
ing is his political method of approaching dramatic material.” In eight chapters, Bar-
nett explores many aspects of Brecht’s prac-
tical and theoretical involvement in theatre;

much of this material has been covered and is widely taught in educational institutions, from epic theatre to the alienation effect to anti-
affluent theatre, and on. But Barnett brings a fresh perspective, his ultimate goal is to
convince the reader that Brecht “as theorist and practitioner remains underexplored or irrel-
levant but waiting to be discovered.”

Brecht on Performance: Meintanhof and Malwrote makes an excellent complement to Brecht in Practice. The book begins by stat-
ing, “Brecht is widely known (and usually feared) as a theorist, as the writer of the theatre.” Not to worry: A team of Brechtian scholars, translators, and performers (director/teacher Di Te-
visi are here to convince you that Brecht should not be feared. Divided into two parts, the book collects Brecht’s major writings for the
stage practitioners. The editors refer to them as “Brecht’s most important words, per-
haps not a ‘work’ at all, but a compilation of deliberations about the practice of the the-
atre (and much else besides) which remained unpublished in his own lifetime.”

Theoretical essays concern the practice of theatre (known as Meintanhof), or “laying bare” the
artistic interpretation.

The second part (Modelbooks) pro-
vides insights into Brecht’s rehearsal tech-
tiques in his productions of The Life of Gal-
ileo, Antigone, and Mother Courage and Her Chil-
dren, as well as documentation and pieces of other plays. We have so much of the latter because of Ruth Berlau’s meticulous picture-
bending. During the production of Life of Gal-
ileo in Los Angeles, Eric Bomboy reported, “the
dirk of her camera had driven Charles Laugh-
ton to threaten to kill her with his bare hands
if she didn’t stop.”

Apart from reading and experiencing the plays themselves, you won’t find a bet-
ter perspective on Brecht’s multifaceted talen-
t than in these four books, which cover all the major facets: You get a glimpse of a
committed theoretician and artist pushing boundaries toward new discoveries, you get the man of theatre, the narrative prose sty-
lis tic, and the poet. You couldn’t ask for more from an artist.

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