



# Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater

*J. Chris Westgate*

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Not long after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, Bertolt Brecht's name was on the lips of many writing about Broadway. Invoked knowingly but not always knowledgeably Brecht became something between marketing strategy and erudite justification for another season of Broadway musicals, another ignominy endured by the German playwright whose epic theater has only seldom been understood in the United States. To say that Brechtian and Broadway theatrical traditions represent divergence of philosophy, method, or ambition is to indulge with the whimsy of Mark Twain in understatement. Nevertheless, many references to Brecht since 2001 imply compatibility instead of contradiction a confusion or corruption that suggested the need of looking closely at what Brecht wrote and intended in his epic theater more than seventy years after his first and, unfortunately, typical experience with United States theater. Beginning with the 1935 production of *The Mother* and moving through recent productions of political theater, including *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *Urinetown: The Musical*, and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, this anthology considers the encounters of Brecht and Broadway in terms of dramaturgy, performance, and reception. The essays in this anthology explore the political, cultural, and economic constraints shaping many of the encounters of Brecht and Broadway in U.S. theater history. This means looking at how, in many cases, epic theater has been co-opted and commodified by Broadway and what that commodification reveals about the culture of theater. Simultaneously, this means theorizing how epic theater finds or can find ways of providing a necessary bulwark against Broadway escapism, and what this suggests for the future of political theater in the U.S. What results is a dialectical history tracing Brecht's encounters with Broadway, a history that opens-up and debates the complicated and often conflicted influence of Bertolt Brecht on United States theater. Dr. Westgate's book on Brecht and Broadway is an excellent study of the reception of Brecht's work in the American theater and academe. Brecht, along with Moliere; Ibsen and Chekhov, is one of the most frequently performed playwrights in translation in America. A thorough investigation of the trajectory of Brecht stagings on Broadway has long been overdue. I am very grateful that Dr. Westgate has taken on the task and arrived at such a splendid result. The book is a must reading for any serious Brecht scholar. Carl Weber, Stanford Drama Department, Collaborator with Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble, Director of many Brecht stagings in the U.S. This is a provocative collection of essays outlining the sometimes unexpected connections between Brecht and the Broadway theatre. Like Brecht himself, these essays are playful, argumentative, and productively dialectical in their contradictions. The book is both entertaining and educational, and bound to provoke healthy debate. I recommend it as a demonstration of the ongoing relevance of Brechtian theories of theatre to the analysis of mainstream commercial theatre.' Sean Carney, Associate Professor, McGill University

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