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Pressurizing the Politics of *The Crucible*: a Brechtian Production of Arthur Miller's Modern Classic

In this article David Barnett documents a practice-as-research project that employed Brechtian approaches to stage dramatic material. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller is a realist text in which the protagonist, John Proctor, redeems himself for the sin of adultery by taking a heroic stand against the Salem witch-hunts. Existing scholarship has revealed a series of gendered biases in the form and content of the play, yet these findings have never been systematically realized in performance. While appearing to defend democratic values, the play's dramaturgical strategies coerce agreement, and this represents a fundamental contradiction. Brecht offers a method that preserves the written dialogue, but interprets it critically onstage, deploying a range of devices derived from a materialist and dialectical interpretation. The aim of the production was to re-present a play with a familiar production history and problematize the political bases on which it conventionally rested. The article discusses the rationale for the theory and practice of contemporary Brechtian theatre and offers the production as a model for future critical realizations of other realist plays. David Barnett is Professor of Theatre at the University of York. His publications include *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* (CUP, 2015), *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (Bloomsbury, 2014), and *Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre* (CUP, 2005).

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THE PHILOSOPHER: Generally your playwrights take such incidents from real life as would arouse sufficient interest in real life, and tailor them in such a way as to make them effective on the stage. Even when they make things up, their inventions are such that . . . it seems as though the incidents have been lifted from real life. All you ought to do is take the incidents themselves as seriously as possible, and the playwright's use of them as lightly as possible.

Bertolt Brecht¹

THROUGH the Philosopher in *Buying Brass* Brecht sets out an approach to directing dramatic texts, an attitude he applied when staging his own work,² as well as that of others. As he states, for a play to qualify for production, it had to be realistic – close to 'real life', as he puts it.

Realism for Brecht, however, was not so much about a playwright's ability to recreate a veneer of reality, as how to sustain the credibility of the action and its social causes.³ With this realistic foundation in place, Brecht could posit a productive tension between

what had been written and how it was to be performed. Of course, this tension exists in all theatrical productions because there is a categorical discrepancy between a collection of words on the page and their articulation and embodiment on a stage. Brecht, however, makes the argument for a practice that actively problematizes the relationship in favour of the director's interpretation, based on the realism of the action.

This is not a call for directorial originality as an end in itself. Brecht had argued against such a position⁴ as mere novelty, preferring to understand originality as not accepting previous receptions of dramatic material and subjecting the material to rigorous analysis. His directorial interpretations were founded on a materialist dialectical⁵ approach to negotiating reality. That is, he sought out the contradictions that informed the realistic speeches and actions, and then worked with his cast to find appropriate means to present them in live performance.

In doing this, he wanted to offer the audience an understanding of the play in question that potentially differed greatly from the meanings at least implied by the playwright and/or that had been handed down in the play's production history. These new meanings were concerned with the politics that often go unspoken between people and their concrete social contexts. Brecht wished to reveal the assumptions and the ideological underpinnings of everyday communication and behaviour. By pointing to the contradictions that may have informed the problems and conflicts of realistic plays, Brecht was offering spectators causes rather than symptoms, inviting them to address the former rather than the latter when considering the problems of a play as a whole. The additional suggestion, predicated on the realistic nature of the drama, was that spectators could then take the theatre's method of analyzing reality, highlighted through its heightened performance of realistic relationships, and apply it to the problems they encountered in everyday life.

In this article I will consider what happens when such an approach is applied to one such realistic play, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (1953). The production studied offers an introduction to how a tradition of interpretation, with its own implied politics, can be challenged and re-presented. The process that led to the production, as set out below, was experimental in that it proceeded from a critical interpretation, but did not assume in advance how such an understanding of the play would be represented in theatrical practice.

The issues were complex, and the solutions were arrived at through a sustained engagement with fundamental Brechtian categories, as also considered below. While I am presenting Miller's play as a case study, it should also be clear that the description and analysis may serve more generally as a model for how any realistic play can be approached and fundamentally reassessed in performance using Brecht's dialectical methods and staging strategies. All the following arguments and examples are taken from my own public production of the play

with students at the University of York in October 2017.⁶

Politics with a Capital and a Small 'P'

Anyone reading or watching *The Crucible* will be struck by its political subject matter. A community is whipped into a state of animosity and recrimination after witchcraft is apparently identified in a group of girls. Trials ensue and many of those who have been denounced are hanged for refusing to confess to colluding with dark forces. As Christopher Bigsby notes: 'Beyond anything else, *The Crucible* is a study in power and the mechanisms by which power is sustained, challenged, and lost.'⁷

The political theme of the play is clear: the Puritans of Salem enforce a set of rules that a contemporary audience will most likely consider capricious, dubious, and pernicious, but which has real consequences for all involved in the play's world. Those in power construct a public forum in order to effect outcomes conducive to themselves. This is what I call 'Politics with a capital "P"': the overt exercise of power at a macro level.

There is also a more subtle version of the power game that regulates relationships in ways that often remain implicit, tacit, or un-commented upon. This is because these structures are the basis of everyday encounters. Such configurations of power are more akin to Aristotle's definition of politics as the 'philosophy of human affairs',⁸ in which politics penetrate all aspects of human interaction.

Lenin's reported definition of politics as 'Who? Whom?'⁹ then adds the dimension of unequal power relations in terms of who is permitted, tolerated, or forbidden from doing something to someone else. More recently, Foucault called this 'micropolitics'.¹⁰ These relationships, I suggest, constitute a 'politics with a small "p"'. While there is clearly a relationship between the two 'P's – they are both predicated on the exercise and experience of power – the one is more overt and identifiable; the other more covert and artful.

Critics have not been slow in recent decades in drawing attention to the politics

with a small 'p' that underpin the more evident manifestations of power in *The Crucible*. Iska Alter opens her feminist critique of the play with the contention: 'It hardly needs to be argued that Arthur Miller is pre-eminently a playwright concerned with exploring the dimensions of male authority and defining the constituents of male identity within patriarchal systems of culture'.¹¹ The emphasis on the male playwright's interests are clear in the play. John Proctor is the central character. As the acts unfold, we learn that he has committed adultery with his servant Abigail Williams and that his bold quest to expose the iniquities of the court both redeem him from his sin and lead to his heroic death, standing up for the truth rather than signing a false confession. His freedom to act like this is predicated on the privileges he enjoys as a man in a patriarchal society. None of the numerous women condemned to hang are afforded an opportunity to defend their principles.

Gendered Power Relations

Wendy Schissel extends the critique to the actual representation of women in the play: 'In forty years of criticism very little has been said about the ways in which *The Crucible* reinforces stereotypes of femme fatales and cold and unforgiving wives in order to assert apparently universal virtues'.¹² She is referencing Abigail as seductress and Proctor's wife Elizabeth as the frigid spouse. The connection between representation and unhistoricized values is a familiar trope in the study of ideology because ideology tends to hide its artifice through the twin mechanisms of naturalization and universalization.¹³ Schissel attacks Miller's realistic aesthetic as the means through which he smuggles such familiar depictions.

Cristina C. Caruso then connects these problematic representations with the play's structure and implied meaning: 'In dramatic terms, Miller is as determined as his forefathers to keep the patriarchal myth breathing, to edit out the marginal female characters who might interfere with this myth. Though the character Proctor might be

guilty of lechery, he redeems his good name and his place in history by the end of the play'.¹⁴ Miller creates a moral landscape in which certain sins can be vitiated because they are not only the fault of the sinner. In the play, the blame is at least partially laid at the door of Abigail as a manipulative vixen and Elizabeth as a sexually inhospitable wife (even though she has borne Proctor two sons and a third child is on the way).

Caruso criticizes Miller's plot construction for the malign and unmarked gendered representations necessary to engineer Proctor's apotheosis. This is perhaps most apparent in Elizabeth's remarkable confession of frigidity in Act IV, but also in the play's curtain line, when she says, 'He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!'¹⁵ Elizabeth's approval of Proctor's 'goodness' serves to erase the ease with which he has resorted to violence in the play and his quick anger in the face of his own wife's pain.

It also explicitly fails to mention the dire economic consequences that the surviving family will face after the breadwinner's voluntary self-sacrifice. Miller avoids material circumstances to celebrate an act of principle – a privilege and luxury afforded to the male protagonist. Such a position is difficult to leave unmentioned in a Brechtian theatre (and in our production Elizabeth ironized the 'I' in the curtain line to highlight her position as a woman in that society).

There are other gendered instances of power relations that a more politicized production may seek to foreground. Jeffrey D. Mason states that 'power flows to those who claim to be able to recognize evil',¹⁶ that is, to the black slave Tituba who is coerced into making the first denunciations and to the girls who accuse the adult villagers as star witnesses at the trials. Mason's is a curious assertion that does not bear dialectical interrogation. Tituba and the girls may appear to have power, but a material analysis undermines this position: the powerful men of the village and the state confer power on them only when it is expedient to serve their purposes.

This is a response to the question 'cui bono?' which appears not to have been asked

in most productions in which Tituba and the girls attain a veneer of power and respect in order to move the plot to its conclusion. A Brechtian production would thus seek to expose the real social relationships at play, not to perpetuate an illusion.

The final political issue overlooked or left unremarked in most productions of the play is one identified by David Savran: 'Arthur Miller's body of work serves as a vast stage on which the liberal humanist subject – that allegedly seamless individual, conceived as author and origin of meaning and action – attempts to construct a linear, unified history.'¹⁷ This general positioning of predominantly male characters overlooks the many historical and social contexts that inform their opinions, actions, and behaviour. In this way, Miller creates blind spots in his dramatic conceptualization by accepting a notion of individualism which is itself historical and ideological. A Brechtian production would peer behind the appearance of individual choice and freedom in order to represent the circumstances under which such illusions can flourish, exposing them in the process.

As is obvious, existing criticism has been amply able to identify the ideological landscape that has informed many fundamental assumptions that drive *The Crucible* in performance. This scholarship, which forms a now accepted critique of this much-staged play, has rarely, however, informed real productions.¹⁸ Before considering the practical theatrical approaches Brecht offers to address these political shortcomings, I will examine Miller's relationship to his own work and the dramaturgical means he develops to retain control over production. That is, I will note what obstacles Miller puts in the way of a more critical appraisal of his play in performance.

The Problematic Voice of the Author

The text of *The Crucible* has several key formal features that make it distinctive. Its language is a stylized English, designed to evoke the historical setting. It is not an accurate simulation of the English of the time; rather, it suggests something old which

is nonetheless comprehensible to a contemporary audience. It is also unadorned and positioned as a version of realistic rather than poetic speech. Miller stated: '*The Crucible* was in part a reaction against some of the weeping surrounding *Salesman*. I wanted a more acerbic kind of play. I wanted to create as much knowing as feeling.'¹⁹ There is thus a kind of distancing built into the language, an attempt to use its unusual formulations to create room for reflection.

However, as Savran notes, 'The sovereign subject that towers above Miller's work is particularly well suited for representation by an actor trained in "the Method", a solemnly psychological approach to acting.'²⁰ Method acting is primarily concerned with representing the kinds of behaviours encountered in everyday life, opening possibilities for close identification between the actor and character, and between the stage and the auditorium. Miller's idiom thus does little to create a wedge between stage and auditorium due to its consistency and evenness.

The means that promote identification are exacerbated by the heightened emotion of certain sections, as directed by the text. The initial denunciations at the end of Act I are to be delivered 'enraptured', 'hysterically', and with 'ecstatic cries'. Similarly, Proctor's speeches at the trial in Act III and monologues in Act IV, in which he defends his decisions to refuse signing the confession, are alive with passion and feeling. Temper and anger, fervour and ardour are present in the four acts. Yet when they are performed 'straight', they can have the effect of collapsing the distance potentially established by the language – their forcefulness exerts an emotional signifier to the audience.

It is difficult to believe that Miller wants the spectators to reflect on Proctor's act of self-sacrifice for the principle of truth, but to accept his heroic stance. Miller conversely fails to answer Schissel's question: 'But what of Elizabeth's suffering?'²¹ The text remains silent; she utters no heartfelt plea or reproach.

Miller also inserts many commentaries into the text that are not meant to be performed but to inform the actors. The texts are inflected with an understanding of indivi-

duals as having innate qualities. Abigail has ‘an endless capacity for dissembling’ (p. 10), while the landowner Thomas Putnam acts according to ‘his vindictive nature’ (p. 15). Such articulations of the characters as being ‘like this’ or ‘like that’ undermine the liveliness of the script and foreclose options that might disagree with Miller’s interpretations. A materialist dialectical analysis of Putnam, for instance, would look to his social context as an active agent in the formation of apparently personal qualities.

As Bigsby notes (but Miller fails to mention), a Royal Charter had been revoked in the America of the late seventeenth century, cancelling all land titles at the time and provoking widespread mutual suspicion.²² With this in mind, a person of coin could easily pursue his own ends with a determination that could be understood as vindictive. But this does not suggest that his nature is such – rather, that the uncertain legal situation prepares the ground for such focused acquisitive action. The analysis does not excuse Putnam for his deeds – he chooses his own actions – but it proposes an additional element in the interpretation of the self: the social context.

Directing Problematic Stage Directions

Authorial control is also present in the ample stage directions Miller provides. These, understandably, support the performance of reproducing the surface of everyday life. They also reinforce Miller’s interpretation of his characters as possessing innate characteristics and behaving in ways he considers appropriate for the design of the play. Consider the following exchange between Proctor and Elizabeth towards the beginning of Act II:

PROCTOR (*with a grin*): I mean to please you, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH (*it is hard to say*): I know it, John.
He gets up, goes to her, kisses her. She receives it. With a certain disappointment, he returns to the table.

PROCTOR (*as gently as he can*): Cider?

ELIZABETH (*with a sense of reprimanding herself for having forgot*): Aye! (p. 48)

The stage directions articulate a strained relationship. Elizabeth cannot accept Proctor’s good intentions because she continues to resent his infidelity with Abigail. She also accepts the domestic lapse with the drink as her own fault. In both cases, Elizabeth treats the problems as a personal matter. Yet while the response to the affair may well be something to be worked through at home, the failure to provide the drink is predicated on the gender roles of the day.

That Elizabeth does not protest but accepts the neglect of her domestic duties as a personal failing reflects Miller’s tacit acceptance of the division of labour at that time. In addition, there is a contradiction between Proctor meaning to please her (acknowledging a shortcoming born of his privilege) and then expecting his drink to be served (maintaining his gendered privilege). While the stage directions do not recognize this, a dialectical performance, as discussed below, can.

It should be clear from this brief discussion that Miller is careful to control key elements of potential productions through his paratextual restrictions. Without this control, the play runs the risk of generating meanings that the author does not desire. Yet my analysis also reveals that there is a clear contradiction between the democratic, truth-seeking themes of the play and the surreptitious dramaturgical constructions that allow those themes to gain traction. That is, the democratic content of the play is in tension with its anti-democratic form that seeks to coerce agreement through empathy.

Brecht criticized empathy as a way of bypassing rational cognition, but came to realize that empathy could not simply be jettisoned, even in a radical, new theatre.²³ I will consider below how a Brechtian production might confront this problem.

Perhaps the most famous infringement of the play’s textual integrity was the Wooster Group’s *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* of 1984. The production assembled a variety of textual elements, yet Miller objected to the fragmentary inclusion of *The Crucible*, including his paratextual character sketches.²⁴ The Group’s employment of extracts from the play was radical and ran counter to any

implied sense of how it was to be staged by cutting it up and presenting it as elements in a montage. A Brechtian challenge to the text works in a different way, in that it retains the text as written, but seeks to intervene in the performance in order to problematize the play's politics with a small 'p' and, in turn, comment on its treatment of the broader political themes.

Precedence of Social Processes

A dialectical theatre is an interrogative theatre: it asks questions of everything that is represented on stage, but not with the aim of extracting psychological 'motivations'. Rather, it seeks to understand the connections between individual and society in a bid to query the 'natural' in human behaviour and to qualify it with social and historical context.

As an example of such an approach, it may be useful to return to the opening of Act II. When first rehearsing this section in our Brechtian production, the actors spoke to each other as would a modern-day husband and wife. The exchanges were lively and dynamic. Yet what had been forgotten was the relationship between men and women in the Puritan America of the late seventeenth century. As a result, Proctor was directed to sit at the table looking comfortable, while Elizabeth stood behind him, her hands held in front of her, with her head slightly lowered.

This positioning is what Brecht called the *Arrangement* of the scene, the visual analogue of social relations. The deliberate placement and articulation of the actors' bodies denotes a gestic approach to the actor, which strives to contextualize the body in the norms and values of its time in the stage world. 'Historicization' was Brecht's term for this staging procedure, and, as Tom Kuhn notes, such a contextualization has a 'two-way' dynamic: 'There may be active analogies between past and present, and there may be continuities.'²⁵

Gestus, in the context of the actor, was Brecht's proposal to connect the body to its place in society. This general shaping was then refined in that that body finds itself in changing circumstances throughout its per-

formance, in the form of *Haltung*. This is the German word for both 'attitude' and 'comportment', and encourages the actors to show their attitudes towards a person, an idea or a situation physically. The aim is to make changes in *Haltung* striking, reflecting an active relationship between individual and situation.

In doing this, the characters show qualities that may contradict each other, loosen a sense of 'natural' response, and open up a more fluid understanding of how changed circumstances can affect behaviour. Indeed, the term 'character' is sometimes misleading, as it implies that individuals have characteristics, much as Miller proposes in his commentaries. We preferred to use the term 'figure' as something more flexible and in line with Brecht's dialectical anthropology.

The physicalized explication of the social context not only set up the relationship between Proctor and Elizabeth visually for the audience, but also helped the actors negotiate the text far more concretely. As a result, the extract quoted above assumed different qualities from those articulated by the stage directions. The contradiction between Proctor's belief that he 'means to please' Elizabeth and his expectation of being served refreshment was brought out by changes in Elizabeth's *Haltung*. Her understanding response to his opening line was immediately undercut by his expectation of drink. Elizabeth moved from a relaxed posture to one that stiffened to fetch the ewer, which was slammed down on the table. Proctor did not register the gesture of resentment, drawing attention, we hoped, to this blindness.

The action develops a logic of cause and effect, and a process, predicated on the social contexts of the play, unfolds before the audience's eyes. Brecht noted: 'Don't put everything under one hat; on the contrary, always pull out a new rabbit from the hat. This is an art that's hardly understood in the theatre.'²⁶ Such advice has led me to institute a rule for the actors: 'Don't walk and talk.' By this, I mean that the actor can deliver a line, move or make a gesture, but not at the same time. The chain of meaning that emerges de-



'Proctor was directed to sit at the table looking comfortable, while Elizabeth stood behind him, her hands held in front of her, with her head slightly lowered.'

naturalizes the behaviours of the figures, due to the production's willingness to present conflicting actions and attitudes side by side, as in the example of Elizabeth, above. By robbing a figure of her or his autonomy, the audience is invited to ask why this is the case and which factors prevail on her to bring about such uneven responses.

Enabling Critical Spectatorship

While the production does not provide 'the answers' and invites the audience to make their own connections between the figures' actions and their social context, it couches its approaches to meaning in an overarching set of interpretations of the text. It is important to stress here that interpretation is never absolute. As Bernd Stegemann notes, there is

a tension between 'actuality' and 'reality', where actuality is something that happens and reality is an individual's response to or interpretation of it. In other words, what we call reality is always relative. Yet as a Marxist he reiterates that one's perspective is defined by one's class, so reality is subjectively differentiated, but collectively experienced.²⁷ Brecht considered that the plethora of meanings of any given actuality was to be delimited by a framework he called the *Fabel*.

The *Fabel* was the dialectical interpretation of the plot, and it informed the whole architecture of the production in question. Brecht believed, like Aristotle, that action, and not the figures, was at the heart of drama: 'We work out situations, and the *Fabel* has the final say. We construct the *Fabel*, not characters that are then thrown into the

Fabel.²⁸ In our approach to *The Crucible*, the *Fabel* helped us inflect the action with a materialist dialectical analysis of the events and the play's dramaturgy. This interpretation addressed the political shortcomings of the play identified by critics, above, and enriched these with some additional insights into the onstage relationships.

According to Miller, the play is unequivocally about one man: 'The centre of the play is the guilt of John Proctor, and the working out of that guilt.'²⁹ There was also a more personal aspect involved:

My own marriage of twelve years was teetering and I knew more than I wished to know about where the blame lay. That John Proctor the sinner might overturn his paralyzing personal guilt and become the most forthright voice against the madness around him was a reassurance to me, and, I suppose, an inspiration.³⁰

The elision of protagonist with author helps us understand not only Miller's construction of the redemption narrative but also his need to limit the possibilities of performing Proctor. This focus on the individual is also supported by other pronouncements from the playwright:

The central impulse for writing at all was not the social but the interior psychological question, which was the question of that guilt residing in Salem which the hysteria merely unleashed, but did not create.³¹

This constellation of thoughts illuminates the political questions raised earlier here and manifestly opposes an interpretation that seeks to locate the action in its socio-historical context. Miller's *Fabel* is thus one of Proctor's fall and rise, and uses the historical setting as a kind of 'local colour'.

Our Brechtian production sought the opposite: to interpret the setting itself and to present it as an active agent in the lives of the figures. Broadly speaking, our *Fabel* sought to construct the social context in terms of class, gender, and race in Act I, then to develop a more detailed understanding of gender relations in Act II in order to effect a critique of Miller's treatment of Proctor in Act IV. Act III was to serve as an example of

how class and gendered power went about its business in the court. Each of these ambitions represents a fundamental ideological critique of Miller's dramaturgy, starting points for practical negotiations with the play's dramatic material.

The first act introduces almost all the Salem villagers as they enter and exit an upper bedroom in Parris's house. It was fairly straightforward to establish the basis of the social hierarchy through gestic acting and *Arrangement*. The servant girls mostly stood with heads bowed; the farmers showed some deference to the clerics; and the Putnams were always looking down their noses at everyone else.

This image suggests the different social strata when Reverend Hale is about to conduct his examination of the bedridden Betty. Hale, in black, lectures Parris, who should be his social equal, but is intimidated by his learning and authority. Rebecca Nurse stands respectfully upstage of them with her head slightly lowered, while Abigail assumes the deferential position of a servant. The Putnams are haughty, while Giles looks on with head slightly bowed, observing the doings of his social betters.

Shifting Power

A dialectical theatre is not, however, a theatre of fixed qualities and characteristics; that would be little better than a character-based production in which the characters were prisoners of their innate personalities. Thus, when the girls confer after the adults have left the bedroom, they assume energetic and upright stances, with Abigail very much trying to control events. Yet here, too, there is a hierarchy, with Mary Warren, the Proctors' servant, finding herself at the bottom of the pecking order. Indeed, her weakness was signalled by Abigail giving her orders without directly addressing her: there was no need to look her in the eyes to ensure compliance.

Similarly, Tituba, socially the lowest of the low as a black female slave, was shown in a range of *Haltungen*. When summoned to answer Hale's questions regarding the alleged



The first act tableau, suggesting the different social strata.

witchcraft at the end of the act, she was terrified and easily cowed by the apparently well-read reverend. Yet it did not take long for the penny to drop and for her to realize her role in the process. As such, the actor was directed to look away from Hale after he asked his questions, searching thoughtfully for a satisfactory answer. When the Putnams suggested the names of the first two women Tituba would later denounce, she looked round at them directly to show the audience that *they* had provided the route to her own survival and that she had not chosen these unfortunate victims herself.

She got her moment of power when Parris asked her for names, but she told him how the Devil instructed her to murder him. In this production, this was a social moment of revenge for the years of abject servitude. The actor was directed to speak at speed, exuding confidence, a quality not seen beforehand, as if she had been waiting for a long time to turn the tables. The Devil served Tituba as a useful bogeyman, and there was

no sense that she actually believed in his existence. She enjoyed her moment of influence, but was also aware that it was only fleeting. And before she finally made her first denunciations, she looked back to the Putnams as if to say 'This is what you wanted, wasn't it?' – thus acknowledging the locus of power in the scene. In short, this sequence, like the others in the production, moved from point to point, accounting for actions rather than allowing them to imply that they had originated with any of the given figures themselves.

An example of maintaining the visibility of social contexts can be found in Miller's frequent use of the vocatives 'woman' and 'mister'. The former is used by men to demonstrate their 'innate' superiority over female addressees; the latter is almost exclusively used by powerful men³² to remind those men beneath them of their 'rightful' place in the class hierarchy. In both cases, the appellations serve as useful markers for social division, yet they can get lost in the

flow of the dialogue. In order to remedy this, all the figures using these words were directed to take a beat, look their addressee up and down, and then deliver the word with a note of disdain. In maintaining this protocol, the production was able to create a lasting gestural motif that ran through all the acts.

Brecht noted in his early theories on epic theatre that the quality of quotation had the effect of diluting individual qualities: 'tables of gestures (the personal is interchangeable)'.³³ The repeated gesture had the effect of pointing to society and not the individual as the source of the interpersonal differentiation. Yet this approach had an additional benefit in that it could be extended to one more theme.

I noted above how the girls in court only *appear* to have any power because it is granted to them temporarily to further the powerful men's ends. In order to show this dialectical position, the judges used the same beat, gesture, and tone when using the word 'child' or 'children' to address the girls. The inclusion of this established motif registered the girls' lack of power while they nonetheless remained central to the successful conviction of the defendants. The gesture helped entrench a dialectic of influence and impotence.

I have already discussed the opening of Act II, in which Elizabeth's place is clearly marked as inferior to Proctor's. Yet she, too, benefits from certain social privileges, and so when Mary returns from the court, Elizabeth assumes the same 'master-of-the-house' *Haltung* as Proctor.

The shifts between dutiful wife and the master's wife show the audience the different roles she plays, and the same applies to all the figures, meek Mary included. When she told the Proctors that she was an officer of the court and demanded respect after speaking up for Elizabeth when the latter was accused in court, she straightened her back and raised her head to suggest that the social balance had shifted, however slightly. Powerful and weak physicalities thus interchanged, suggesting that the audience should consider the bigger picture rather than

accounting for the inconsistencies in the individual figures themselves.

Nor was Proctor himself granted the usual indulgences of a conventionally realist production. There, as Mojtaba Jaihouni and Noorbakhsh Hooti continue to assert, we find:

a self-determining subject, [who] turns toward uncompromising self-criticism only to challenge the greater evil of moral complacency. . . . Despite some lapses into acquiescence, John Proctor can be seen as anarchic, autonomous, and ethical.³⁴

Such a position confers a heroic aura on Proctor's demise. Yet, as noted already, his action is not unambiguously positive: he not only sacrifices himself, but also his wife and family in satisfying his commitment to one truth while remaining blind to any consequence for those left behind.

What is John Proctor?

In order to effect a more critical stance from the spectator, the production highlighted the self-pity and pathos in Proctor's final justifying speeches. Additionally, he says to himself and then to his wife:

God in Heaven, what is John Proctor, what is John Proctor? I think it is honest, I think so; I am no saint. . . . Would you give them such a lie? Say it. Would you ever given them this? You would not. (p. 125)

In a 'straight' production, this represents Proctor's desire to do the right thing and his acknowledgement that Elizabeth would not lie. In our production, the first lines were delivered as a kind of self-deception; that the man we have seen railing against his wife, failing to take Abigail to task for her false evidence immediately, and wielding violence on his servant cannot be correct in his judgement of himself. The lines to Elizabeth were given as a furious reproach: she would not have the strength of character to follow his lead. As such, the portrayal of Proctor aimed at criticism of his apparent heroism, framing Proctor as a deluded martyr who was still displaying the misogynist traits seen earlier in the production.



Husband and wife both 'masters of the house' before the servant.

Another significant aspect of Brechtian stagecraft addresses a more common feminist critique. As Elin Diamond notes:

The body, particularly the female body, by virtue of entering the stage space, enters representation – it is not just there, a live, unmediated presence, but rather (1) a signifying element in a dramatic fiction; (2) a part of a theatrical sign system whose conventions of gesturing, voicing, and impersonating are referents for both performer and audience; and (3) a sign in a system governed by a particular apparatus, usually owned and operated by men for the pleasure of a viewing public whose major wage earners are male.³⁵

She observes a societal self-and-other system working in representation, where the female body is entangled in representation while the (white) male body can enjoy its status as 'a live, unmediated presence'. The male self is the norm; the female other is the exception and attracts a special standing as a result.

Brechtian theatre, as understood in this production, traps all the figures in a representational system through its insistence on framing each body as socially significant, and

moving figures around the stage in a careful dance, where the choreographer is always offstage. Everyone is subject to the rigours of representation, and is open to the audience's critical evaluation.

Historicization and the Comic

In a lecture in 1999 on *The Crucible*, Miller reflected that he wished he'd 'had the temperament to do an absurd comedy, which is what the situation so often deserved'. Yet what he did write became, as he noted in the same lecture, 'the tragedy of heroic resistance to a society possessed to the point of ruin'.³⁶ It is difficult to find laughter in many of the productions of the play, and for good reason: the absurd situation leads to real deaths and suffering. That said, the playwright did acknowledge the presence of humour in the text, but averred that *The Crucible* could only be understood as a comedy by God.³⁷

There is a gravity to the play that reflects its serious subject matter. Brecht, however,

was not put off by such a position. He wrote on humour:

You can talk humorously and seriously about serious things and humorously and seriously about humorous things. Generally speaking, people without a sense of humour find it more difficult to understand the *Great Method* [i.e. dialectics].³⁸

The dialectic is always inverting accepted wisdoms and revealing aspects that will surprise and astonish. Such a disappointment of expectations is the foundation of the comic.

Brecht was also keen to point out how values and behaviours change over time. A theatre that could show such shifts with a view to connecting socio-historical context to action on stage was one that historicized dramatic texts. As should be clear from the discussion above, this production sought to historicize *The Crucible* by paying close attention to the social hierarchies and gender relations of the time.

Conventional productions tend not to historicize, but merely to evoke the past through costume: history is visually, but not socially present. Historicization offers the audience palpable differences between the past and the present in order to achieve two different yet related ends. First, the process signals that change in human societies is possible; the past *is* a different place. Second, it invites the audience to account for the differences between past and present and to recognize continuities.

The view from the present back to the past can also admit the comic, a category that disrupts identification in the very act of laughing at someone or something. Indeed, Ralf Simon argues that Brecht approved of comedy as a mechanism for interrupting identification and engendering distance. Yet he goes on to speculate that Brecht would have preferred if the audience refrained from laughing itself: 'for him, laughter is cognitively too inconsequential'.³⁹ Our Brechtian production also deployed humour at various junctures as a means of engendering a more critical attitude towards the events on stage, but sought laughter in order to register the success of the strategy and to affect the

atmosphere in the auditorium as a whole.

It was important to undermine the play's earnestness, and a central prong of this strategy was to ridicule the superstitious underpinnings of the witch-hunt itself. When, for instance, Parris is about to leave the bedroom midway through Act I, he gives solemn advice to Abigail regarding his unconscious daughter Betty: 'If she starts for the window, cry for me at once. . . . There is a terrible power in her arms today' (p. 18). In our production, Parris sheepishly imitated a bird, flapping its wings, and then departed. The gestures comically heightened his absurd belief that Betty could fly. His earnestness contrasted with his performance's silliness, preserving his commitment to his opinion while indicating something quite different to the audience.

Later in the act, Reverend Hale arrives, Parris having summoned him as an expert in witchcraft, but by the end of Act III he finally realizes the charade in which he has been participating and rejects it. In order to make his shift all the more striking, he was introduced in our production as a well-meaning but potentially dangerous charlatan, whose learning was not based on evidence but fanciful beliefs. Thus, when he conducted his examination of Betty and pronounced his Latin words of exorcism, he performed exaggerated gestures and spoke in 'the grand style' to ensure that the audience was not taken in by the practices of the day.

He became far more menacing, however, when he interrogated Tituba to solicit her denunciation. Here he commands her to wake Betty and compels her to confess by invoking her love of God. In this sequence, Hale gestured wildly, pointing to Betty and to the heavens. Tituba then mirrored his movements back to him, showing the audience, by looking outwards at times, that she was not taken in, but was following his ritual in order to stay alive. The procedure was revealed as a sham, and the audience was invited to laugh at the unacceptable means that led to the first denunciations.

Other elements of orthodox Brechtian stagecraft also helped to criticize the figures on stage. Brecht's notion of *Haltung* is in



Elizabeth, 'inclining herself away from the action, let out a yawn'.

itself an effective means for generating comedy because a figure changes when the situation changes, something that can raise laughter when the change is drastic and unexpected. For instance, when Parris reports in Act IV that Abigail has absconded and taken his savings with her, he, remarkably, concludes that he is not to blame. Here, the actor assumed a different *Haltung* for each section of the sequence from shock to self-pity and ultimately guilt-free self-righteousness. The final position was the pay-off to the speeches, as Parris, so sincere in his outrage and his pecuniary misery, was now brazen enough to cast off all personal liability.

Comic Intervention

Perhaps the most unexpected comic intervention came in Act IV. Here, the production invited the audience to laugh at Proctor, a man about to go to the gallows. The basis for this decision was a need to distance the audience from Proctor's act in order to question the conditions that gave rise to it. Proctor makes several speeches in which he emotionally justifies his act of self-sacrifice. However, as discussed, Proctor's decision is

not without its consequences for his family. He makes his decision to protect his good name, based on privileging himself over his family, a trait of the individualist. Accordingly, Proctor's justifications were often performed with his head turned down and at an angle to indicate an introverted self-pity. At such points, Elizabeth offered additional visual contrast in that she crossed her arms wearily as if to say, 'There he goes again'.

This gesture was heightened in Proctor's final speech to Elizabeth where he offers her advice: 'Give them no tear! Tears pleasure them! Show honour now, show a stony heart and sink them with it!' (p. 130). In our interpretation, the advice was patronizing, stating the obvious, and positioning Proctor, as ever, as wise patriarch and Elizabeth as passive female. In order to lampoon the speech, Elizabeth, who had already disconnected herself from the scene by inclining herself away from the action, let out a yawn. The gesture always elicited laughter. The aim was not to ridicule Proctor as such, but to distance the audience from him. This was to allow a more considered evaluation of his action, interrupting the gravity of the situation with an unexpected action.

The introduction of the comic served two primary objectives: to historicize the action and to frustrate identification. Both were designed to empower the audience to reach informed judgements about the figures and the decisions they made in the context of the historical period as performed in the present. The main obstacle was Miller's own dramaturgy, which is configured in such a way that it closes down interpretive avenues that might be critical of Proctor and his redemption.

Mason argues that distance is always implicit in a contemporary audience's responses to *The Crucible* because we know that no one on stage actually compacted with the Devil.⁴⁰ I have suggested instead that this distance collapses due to Miller's realistic construction of the characters, their compelling emotional speeches, and the earnestness that is usually present in performance. Comedy provides distance because it can disappoint expectations. Such disappointments reinterpret dramatic material and present it in a different frame, that helps draw attention to elements that go unspoken in conventional productions and make the politically invisible visible.

The Viability of a Brechtian Intervention

It is difficult to believe that Miller would have approved of this production of *The Crucible*. On the one hand, he wrote in an introduction to the play: 'The work of Berchtold [sic] Brecht inevitably rises up in any such quest' for a new form to deal with the play's problems. 'It seems to me that, while I cannot agree with his concept of the human situation, his solution to the problem of consciousness is admirably honest and theatrically powerful.'⁴¹

It is not quite certain what he means by 'consciousness', but he did elaborate on his understanding of Brecht elsewhere: 'It's a bitter end of the world where man is a voice of his class function, and that's it. Brecht has a lot of that in him but he's too much of a poet to be enslaved by it.'⁴² Here Miller falls into a trap originally prepared by the Cold War milieu in which Martin Esslin wrote.⁴³

He wanted to cleave the work from the politics in order to salvage the former from the latter without countenancing that the one cannot exist without the other.⁴⁴ Miller misunderstands the richness of a dialectical production,⁴⁵ something that militates against an essentialist notion of what class might denote and how it might be differently represented on stage by a host of individuals.

The production discussed in this essay proceeded from a dialectical analysis of the drama and sought appropriate stagecraft to present the *Fabel*. From the outset, the aim was to criticize Miller's ideological construction of a male hero with a view to offering audiences a very different interpretation to that which has graced stages for the past several decades.

That interpretation was not, however, based on how characters were to be understood. Characters are not independent of their social context in Brechtian theatre, and so previous productions that have presented Abigail, for example, as a real child or with childish naivety have not proceeded from an immanent analysis of the play that would reveal the loaded nature of *all* representation in *The Crucible*. The individual is not an autonomous entity here, but one that is always caught in networks of social forces.

Brecht invites theatre-makers to undertake a total critique of a play in order to show the connections between individual and society. *The Crucible* lends itself well to such an examination because of its tight dramaturgy and the heavy-handed authorial interventions that aim to control meaning. Here I have argued that a materialist dialectical analysis can lead to staging decisions that re-evaluate a classic play as an exercise in ideological criticism and performance. What emerges is a coherent approach that challenges a dominant reception of the play and offers the audience a reinterpretation for its consideration.

Brechtian theatre is rooted in a dialectical and materialist approach to understanding realistically constructed stage worlds. Going back to the quotation that opened this article, I suggest that Brecht can prise open seemingly closed texts by respecting the action

while treating a playwright's implied meanings with scepticism and, indeed, hostility. The role of historical and sociological research is important in supporting the material reality of the action that is to be depicted, while a penetrating dialectical analysis of the apparently self-evident can reveal richness and contradiction. The goal is not to produce novelty for novelty's sake, but to represent society and the individuals that inhabit it as dynamic and interdependent. Such an approach embodies the political credo that change is both possible and achievable – or as Brecht put it, 'Contradictions are our hope!'⁴⁶

Notes and References

1. Bertolt Brecht, *Buying Brass*, in Brecht, *Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Modelbooks*, ed. Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles, and Marc Silberman (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 11–125.
2. Perhaps the best-known example is when Brecht registered amazement at scenes from his own play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* when directing a production in 1953–4 (Hans Bunge, *Tagebuch einer Inszenierung. Bertolt Brecht führt Regie bei seinem Stück 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis'*, entry for 27 November 1953, Bertolt Brecht Archive, 944/1-105).
3. See David Barnett, 'Dialectics and the Brechtian Tradition: Some Thoughts on Politicized Performance', *Performance Research*, XXI, No. 3 (2016), p. 6–15, at p. 8, for both Brecht's definition of 'realistic' and a commentary.
4. See Bertolt Brecht, '[Originale Auffassungen zu Brechtstücken]', in Brecht, *Grosse kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlef Müller, XXXIII (Berlin; Frankfurt/Main: Aufbau und Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 127. Subsequent reference to this edition appears as 'BFA' followed by a volume and page number.
5. Not, however, a dialectical materialist one, which was too closely associated with codified and approved Marxist narrative orthodoxy. Compare the revised and accurate translation of the term in Section 45 of the 'Short Organon for the Theatre', in the new edition of *Brecht on Theatre* as opposed to John Willett's in the first.
6. The production was a part of my 'Brecht in Practice' research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/N003047/1). Full documentation can be found at <brechtinpractice.org/plays/crucible>.
7. Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: a Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 150.
8. I take this translation from Dustin Sebell, 'The Problem of Political Science: Political Relevance and Scientific Rigor in Aristotle's "Philosophy of Human Affairs"', *American Journal of Political Science*, LX No. 1 (2016), p. 85–96, at p. 85.
9. Leon Trotsky, 'Towards Capitalism or Towards Socialism? The Language of Figures', written 1925, <www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1925/11/towards.htm>, accessed 1 August 2019.
10. See, for example, Christian Gilliam, *Immanence and Micropolitics: Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
11. Iska Alter, 'Betrayal and Blessedness: Explorations of Feminine Power in *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *After the Fall*', in June Schlueter, ed., *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama* (London; Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), p. 116–45, at p. 116.
12. Wendy Schissel, 'Re(dis)covering the Witches in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: a Feminist Reading', *Modern Drama*, XXXVII, No. 3 (1994), p. 461–73, at p. 461.
13. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: an Introduction*, new and updated edition (London: Verso, 2007), p. 56–61.
14. Cristina C. Caruso, '"One Finds What One Seeks": Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* as a Regeneration of the American Myth of Violence', *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, VII, No. 3 (1995), p. 30–42, at p. 38.
15. Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, ed. Susan C. W. Abbotsen (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 131. Subsequent page references to the text are to this edition.
16. Jeffrey D. Mason, *Stone Tower: the Political Theater of Arthur Miller* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 109.
17. David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: the Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 29.
18. A quick survey of recent productions or those posted online on YouTube, for example, betrays a very standard production history in which Stanislavskian approaches and aesthetics tend to dominate (although there is also a degree of melodrama to be found in the online student productions). The only concrete interpretational variations tend to centre on Abigail, with some productions presenting her as a confused teenager rather than an evil temptress. Yet even here, this is a question of *character*. As is shown at the end of this article, simply inflecting a character differently does little to affect the ideological underpinning of all the individuals on a stage.
19. Miller, in Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Miller* (London: Nick Hern, 2002), p. 87.
20. Savran, p. 32.
21. Schissel, p. 469.
22. See Bigsby, p. 147.
23. See John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory* (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2004), p. 292–3.
24. See David Savran, *The Wooster Group 1975–85: Breaking the Rules* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), p. 169–220.
25. Tom Kuhn, 'Brecht Reads Bruegel: *Verfremdung*, Gestic Realism and the Second Phase of Brechtian Theory', *Monatshefte*, CV, No. 1 (Spring 2013), p. 101–22, at p. 105.
26. Brecht, in Heinz Kahlau, 'Notate *Winterschlacht*', undated, p. 25, Berliner Ensemble Archive, File 18. Translations from the German are mine unless otherwise acknowledged.
27. Bernd Stegemann, *Lob des Realismus* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2015), p. 77 and 17 respectively.
28. Bertolt Brecht, 'About our Stagings', in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, third edn, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 274. I have substituted the word 'Fabel' for 'plot' in the English translation for clarity. As will become evident, the two are not the same.
29. Miller, in Gussow, p. 102.
30. Arthur Miller, 'Why I Wrote *The Crucible*: an Artist's Answer to Politics', *New Yorker*, 21 October 1996

<www.plosin.com/beatbegins/archive/millercrucible.htm>, accessed 1 August 2019.

31. Arthur Miller, 'Introduction to the Collected Plays', in Miller, *Plays*, Vol. 1 (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 3–55, at p. 42.

32. The exception here is when Proctor uses the term ironically towards Judge Danforth, mocking the mismatch of his high social position and his blindness to the girls' deceptions in court (see Miller, 2010, p. 106).

33. Brecht, '[Plagiat als Kunst]', in BFA, 21, p. 318.

34. Mojtaba Jeihouni and Noorbakhsh Hooti, "'Because It Is My Name!'" Miller, Proctor, and Parrhesia in *The Crucible*', *Orbis Litterarum*, LXXII, No. 2 (2018), p. 103–26, at p. 105.

35. Elin Diamond, 'Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism', *The Drama Review*, XXXII, No. 1 (1988), p. 82–94, at p. 89.

36. Arthur Miller, 'The Crucible in History', in Miller, *The Crucible in History and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 3–55, at p. 39 and 35 respectively.

37. Miller, in Gussow, p. 35.

38. Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht's Me-ti: Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things*, ed. and trans. Antony Tatlow (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 81.

39. Ralf Simon, 'Zur poetischen Anthropologie der Komödie in Brechts *Messingkauf*', *Brecht Yearbook*, XXIV (1999), p. 276–90, at p. 280.

40. See Mason, p. 108.

41. Miller, 'Introduction', p. 45.

42. Arthur Miller, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. and introduced Robert A. Martin (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 272.

43. See Martin Esslin, *Brecht: a Choice of Evils* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1959).

44. And, in doing this, started a tradition that can be traced to John Fuegi in his *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos according to Plan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), which de-politicizes Brecht's stagecraft (particularly p. 110–86).

45. This may have something to do with the somewhat black-and-white approach Jean-Paul Sartre took in his Marxist adaptation of the play for the cinema, *Les Sorcières de Salem* (1957). Miller understood the film as reducing 'man to a digit in the social dialectic' (Miller, in Mason, p. 40).

46. Bertolt Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 147–99, at p. 148.