



The Threepenny Opera: a learning play in a laboratory of a late Soviet school

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ABSTRACT – *The Threepenny Opera: a learning play in a laboratory of a late Soviet school* – This article presents a case study considering key scenes from Bertolt Brecht's play *The Threepenny Opera* that were performed in a Moscow school theatre of the late USSR, in 1982. Collective working under the conditions of a theatre laboratory engendered a new methodological approach referring to another Brechtian format, namely, the learning play. The article problematizes the self-reflective learning of the students and their teacher whilst working under theatre laboratory conditions on a Brechtian text. The self-reflective practices were discovered by the amateur actors through the sudden but inevitable effect of Brecht's alienation technique within the emerging learning play format.

Keywords: **Bertolt Brecht. Learning Plays. *The Threepenny Opera*. Soviet School. Theatre Rehearsals.**

RÉSUMÉ – *L'Opéra de quat'sous: une pièce didactique dans un laboratoire d'une école de l'ancienne Union soviétique* – Cet article présente une étude de cas portant sur des scènes clés de la pièce de Bertolt Brecht *L'Opéra de quat'sous* qui ont été jouées dans un théâtre scolaire de Moscou à la fin de l'URSS, en 1982. Le travail collectif dans les conditions d'un laboratoire de théâtre a engendré une nouvelle approche méthodologique renvoyant à un autre format de Brecht, à savoir la *pièce didactique*. L'article problématise l'apprentissage autoréflexif des élèves et de leur professeur impliqué dans les processus de leur laboratoire de théâtre tout en travaillant sur le texte de Brecht. Les pratiques d'autoréflexion ont été découvertes par les acteurs amateurs grâce à l'effet soudain mais inévitable de distanciation de Brecht dans le format de jeu d'apprentissage émergé.

Mots-clés: **Bertolt Brecht. Pièces didactiques. *L'Opéra de quat'sous*. École Soviétique. Répétitions de théâtre.**

RESUMO – *A Ópera dos Três Vinténs: uma peça didática em um laboratório de uma escola da antiga União Soviética* – Este artigo apresenta um estudo de caso sobre cenas específicas da peça *A Ópera dos Três Vinténs* de Bertold Brecht, encenadas em um espetáculo de teatro estudantil de Moscou, na antiga URSS, em 1982. O trabalho coletivo sob as condições de um teatro laboratório engendraram uma nova abordagem referente a outro formato brechtiano, a peça didática. O artigo problematiza a aprendizagem autorreflexiva dos estudantes e de seu professor ao trabalharem sob condições de teatro laboratório em um texto brechtiano. As práticas autorreflexivas foram descobertas pelos atores amadores por intermédio do súbito, embora inevitável, efeito de distanciamento de Brecht no formato da peça didática emergente.

Palavras-chave: **Bertolt Brecht. Peças didáticas. *A Ópera dos Três Vinténs*. Escola Soviética. Ensaios Teatrais.**

A Brechtian-Inflected Theatre Laboratory in the Late USSR

The research for this article focuses on pedagogical work on scenes selected by Yuri Friedmann from Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) for the school theatre at Moscow Hermann Matern School Nr 70 in 1982¹. This investigation is based on an interview with Svetlana Gorbatkova, who played the role of Polly Peachum in the play. Two years after this production, immediately after finishing school, she trained to become a professional actress. We are both graduates of this school: Svetlana graduated in 1982, and I, myself in 2000. We have known each other for many years through mutual friends who are also graduates of this school. The interview was conducted in the spring of 2019 for the forthcoming 16th symposium of the International Brecht Society (IBS). The symposium was titled *Brecht Among Strangers*. The interview lasted more than two hours.

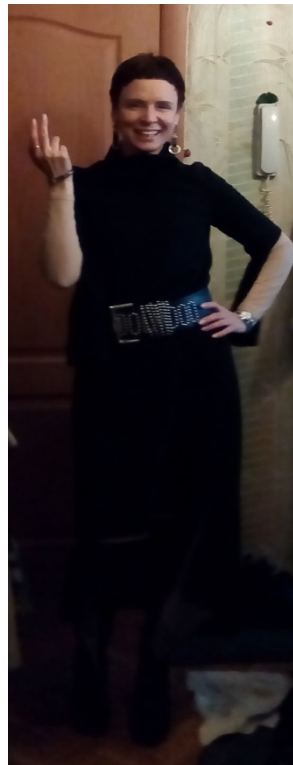


Figure 1 – Svetlana Gorbatkova arrives to be interviewed about *The Threepenny Opera* production of 1982.

Source: Author's personal archive.



Figure 2 – Svetlana Gorbatkova during the interview in March 2019.
Source: Author's personal archive.

The purpose of choosing for study the aforementioned amateur production was to emphasize the importance of that particular show in the history of the school and in the future lives of the participants. The production was the only pedagogical exploration of a Brecht play at our school. Following its founding in 1965, the Moscow Hermann Matern School had always stood out in matters of theatrical school education; a fact that Svetlana and I discussed *between the lines* of our interview². We discovered that we could not think of any other examples of high schools that would, at that time, have explored similar theatre concepts, integrated at all levels of education. Nor could we think of any school that would have been so engaged in making theatrical performances. That said, we acknowledged that the methods of agit-propaganda, political songs and tributes to Russian/(pro-) Soviet writers and poets had existed in other Soviet schools, as they had, initially, at School Nr 70. However, the fact that a theatrical tradition existed at School Nr 70 on a regular basis for four decades makes it an exception among Soviet and now Russian schools³.

Historically, theatre laboratories have been characterized by their *revolutionary* origins. Consider, for example, Stanislavski and his Studio, which was the first theatre laboratory to reveal that the processes of theatre production could be the focus of research. This was a revolutionary step in the history of modern theatre. The internationally renowned theatre laboratory researcher Mirella Schino (2009) argues that a key characteristic of a theatre laboratory is that it promotes “[...] a revolution of the human being,

brought about through theatre” (Schino, 2009, p. 30). In this context, the revolutionary character of Friedmann’s undertaking (which certainly meets the criteria of a theatre laboratory) was, firstly, the choice of Brecht’s play (especially as Brecht’s reception in Soviet society was always equivocal); secondly, the staging of Brecht at a school with adolescents; and, thirdly, the inevitable elision, in a Brechtian-inflected theatre laboratory, between rehearsal and learning processes through the specific possibilities of the text. Friedmann’s attention to the working process and the self-reflective learning of both his students and himself provides considerable material for studying the work of non-professional actors within a laboratory context.

Despite a strong focus on self-reflective learning, the school production also enjoyed huge public success. It became a noted production thanks to the vocal approbation of audience members who attended the first performance and the decision of the school director to present scenes from *The Threepenny Opera* outside of the school. Friedmann and his students were sent to the factories in our district to perform for the workers. Only a few pieces of set were brought into the factory rooms: an iron grille, an imitation scaffold and a chair. Minimalist costumes included light, sleeveless 1920s-style satin dresses; black, heeled shoes and pearl necklaces for women; black, neutral clothes for men; and modern clothes (jeans and a loose, worn black sweater) for the figure of Mack the Knife (played by Yuri Friedmann himself). According to Svetlana, costumed for his role, Friedmann seemed to pay homage to the famous actor Vladimir Vysotski⁴, who was the absolute star of the then-dissident Taganka Theatre under the direction of Yuri Lyubimov. Thus equipped, the young students and their German teacher performed for the workers in the factories.

The school actors were successful there, too. Svetlana was not able to experience their success objectively because, she explained, being on stage, she was immersed in the scenic action, so she only noticed the reaction of the audience when taking her bows at the end of the performance. What Friedmann and his school actors did not receive (what the actors did not even ask for) was any audience feedback. According to Svetlana, no interview, public discussion, review or the like was carried out after the performances in the factories. Paradoxically, the reason for this was the unpopularity of Brecht’s works.

In the late-Soviet Union, Brecht was constantly ignored in almost every cultural field. Brecht was rarely read or performed in the theatre, let alone brought to the screen. In Moscow alone, theatre performances based on Brecht's works were limited to a handful of examples. In April 1964, the founder and director of the legendary avant-garde Taganka Theatre in Moscow, Yuri Lyubimov, produced *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941), which quickly became the symbol of this theatre and remains so to the present day. In May 1966, Lyubimov performed *Life of Galileo* (1938), but ten years later it was banned for political reasons and removed from the programme. In 1975, a production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944), directed by Robert Sturua, appeared in the Georgian Shota Rustaveli Theatre in Tbilisi. In 1980, the artistic director of Moscow Theatre of Satire, Valentin Pluchek, staged *The Threepenny Opera* starring Andrey Mironov⁵. This ends the short list of late-Soviet Brecht theatre productions. Hardly any of the Soviet films based on Brecht are remembered. Brecht was also poorly read in the USSR: many of his works were stocked in special bookshops or in second-hand shops for foreign language literature but circulated poorly⁶.

The aforementioned observations highlight the background against which little intellectual exchange could take place between the young actors of the school performance (who performed without any special knowledge of Brecht and his theories) and the factory employees. The reason for this was an ambivalent attitude to Brecht as a dramatist, which was deeply entrenched in Soviet society. This was because, in the Soviet Union, Brecht was perceived primarily as Stanislavski's opponent, and his oeuvre was treated with suspicion. Brecht and his concept of Epic Theatre were marginalized for a long time and, in contrast to Socialist Realism, which is inextricably associated with the name of Stanislavski, Brechtian theatre was rendered insignificant⁷. Unfortunately, it is uncertain whether the factory workers detected in Brecht's play traits that also existed in the political reality in their country.

Regardless of the lack of feedback from the factory workers and the amateur nature of the production, this school show had an extraordinary impact⁸, despite being staged during a time of reduced interest in Brecht's work. A school production that exposed the power elites to such an extent and explored political issues that few professional theatres would have dared to put on stage was definitely worthy of respect. And this production was

respected both for the work of Friedmann and the school students, and for the undeservedly suppressed work of Brecht.

The unexpected and rare experience that this production offered participants and the outside world, a radical experiment with a political-educational theatre form, is an exception among Brechtian productions of the Soviet period. A theatre researcher would definitely find it difficult to discover a similar Brecht production, with non-professional actors, in the Soviet Union. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine uncovering an example of a production which exhibited all the features of a *Lehrstück*, or *learning play* (a short, radical experimental form of a theatrical play introduced by Brecht in the 1920s which explored both the nature of learning through acting and applying postures and personal attitudes to the self-performed material). In fact, this amateur production of *The Threepenny Opera*, fostered amongst teachers and students what the theatre director and anthropologist Eugenio Barba called “[...] a well-defined milieu with a specific working culture [...]” (Schino, 2009, p. 26), or, in other words, a nascent theatre laboratory.

The Emergence of a *Learning Play* Format as a Condition of Considering Another Political Reality

As became clear during the interview with Svetlana, the work on the production of *The Threepenny Opera* was similar to that on a *Lehrstück* (learning play). However, it was not planned as such by Yuri Friedmann, the director (and lead actor) of the production. Paradoxically, Svetlana’s account of the making of the production during the interview made it clear very quickly that the rehearsal process and, above all, its impact on the participants, had in retrospect all the features and characteristics of Brecht’s experimental working method for learning plays. Yet, neither the teacher who directed the production, nor the participating students realized that they were applying Brecht’s working methods. Needless to say, the sudden effect of a learning play format was not the aim of the school project. So, how did amateur actors, students in a high school in the late-Soviet Union, come to unknowingly apply Brecht’s artistic ideas of working on a learning play? The answer to this question should be sought from Brecht himself.

As is well known, Brecht conceived of his learning plays as a series of *experiments*. As he wrote, “[...] the learning play teaches by being played, not by being seen” (Brecht, 1976, p. 164)⁹. The concept of the learning

play is based on the notion that the actors as learners become executors and co-authors when performing theatrical experiments within their group. This is achieved by “[...] performing certain actions, adopting certain attitudes, reproducing certain speeches” (Brecht, 1976, p. 164)¹⁰. The key concept here is *attitude* (in German: *Haltung*). This entails the coming together of inner mental attitudes (i.e., visions, ideas, convictions), with external physical attitudes (i.e., postures, movements, gestures and facial expressions). Svetlana was astonished when, after a recalling in detail the making of the show, she learned from me that their rehearsal process for *The Threepenny Opera* had already been described perfectly by the dramaturge Brecht in his outlining of working methods for learning plays! Their collective work on this play could not have been any different because it is part of Brecht’s dramatic method that those involved in a rehearsal process of his play automatically become learners¹¹. Furthermore, it was the laboratory conditions that allowed the teacher (playing simultaneously the role of a director) to create, after classes, in the rehearsal room a protected space in which the working process became the pedagogical means of promoting inquiry and research through embodied experiment. It could therefore be argued that, while *The Threepenny Opera* was not written as a *Lehrstück* play, there is an inherent dramaturgical approach that is embedded in Brecht’s writing that emerges for performers/audience/director as a potential dialectic and thus is perhaps not necessarily a teaching strategy that needs to be imposed knowingly.

In addition, the state of society in the late-USSR made the scenes from *The Threepenny Opera* that were performed by the students of the 10th grade timely and topical. It is precisely this political context that provides answers to the questions that arise from Friedmann’s practical-pedagogical approach. This context also provides an explanation of the, initially concealed, personal and societal effects of this late-Soviet school performance. The personal impacts manifested themselves later in their influence on the lives of the participants. The societal effects can be seen in the fact that Friedmann and his students were invited to factories to perform their *Threepenny Opera* scenes for the workers.

All scenes in the translation by Solomon Apt (Brecht, 1963) that were selected followed from the moment when Mackie Messer (Mack the Knife) is put in jail and all his would-be friends and his wife appear there one after

the other. It is precisely at this moment that all of these characters reveal their underlying motives. In other words, Friedmann chose a scene in which the true objectives, bits and tasks of the characters are made apparent. It was in performing the exposed values of the character of Polly Peachum that Svetlana, a schoolgirl educated within a socialist ideology, had a moment of inner conflict. However, Brecht's dramaturgy, which is common to all of his theatre texts, helped to resolve that conflict through the *alienated* (in German: *Verfremdungseffekt, V-Effekt*) style of play. When Svetlana read through the text of her role, she was extremely disconcerted about the behaviour of the wife (Polly Peachum) towards her husband (Mack the Knife). During the interview she asked herself with ironic bewilderment: *How can a wife behave like that?*

Both before and after her professional actor's training, Svetlana was convinced that in real life, as well as on stage, one should perform from the personal level to the social level. As a Soviet citizen and student, as she explained, her belief was that, if one wants to understand how one should act, what attitude should be adopted and what the play is all about, one should always ask oneself to project from the personal to the social. Without such a perspective, she believed, one would not be able to perform on stage. In the case of rehearsals for *The Threepenny Opera*, Svetlana had such serious inner conflicts that she was, indeed, unable to take to the stage. Those conflicts related to the behaviour (in Brecht's terminology *the attitude*) of her character, Polly, to her husband, Macheath. When Svetlana read through her role, she remembered the magazine series *Rabotnitsa*¹², to which her family subscribed. In the magazine she had read an account of the wives of the *Decembrists*, a secret group of Russian noble officers who sparked the first revolutionary movement against the tsar and were exiled to Siberia after an unsuccessful uprising in December 1825. They were beautiful women in splendid dresses who voluntarily followed their exiled husbands to Siberia to spend the rest of their lives with them, the convicts, in the mines. Svetlana found the idea of self-sacrifice – for the benefit of the family, the husband, the homeland – to be essential.

Suddenly, through rehearsing the Brecht play, this schoolgirl, who grew up with such clearly defined cultural ideals, was confronted with a text in which the wife explained to her captured husband that he was asking her to pay too much money to get him out of jail! Svetlana was outraged by her

character's speech, which prioritized the family business over the life of a family member. So, the choice of an acting style became a stumbling block for the amateur school actress who had no previous knowledge of Brecht's dramaturgy and theory. She was expected to show a lot through her acting in that scene: what could not be conveyed through the text needed to be clarified through her personal attitude to scenic events. According to the plot, the wife visits her husband in prison, who has been sentenced to hanging, she compliments him on his suit and comments positively on the fact that his forthcoming death will not have a negative impact on this business. Indeed, Polly goes as far as to say that the family business will thrive without Mackie, so he should not demand so much money for his release.

This moment in the play is at the heart of the inner conflict for the young actress. Aside from the complex relationships between the characters, she was troubled by the seemingly negative nature of Polly as a leading character. As a Soviet schoolgirl, Svetlana was accustomed to the idea of a positive protagonist. Svetlana also had difficulty with the scene in which Mackie is on the scaffold and addresses all his sham friends, only for them to refuse him, telling him, at the same time, how good he is and how his business will flourish without him. The ambiguity of this situation, and its reflection of a capitalist society, were for Svetlana, as a girl from a socialist society, difficult to understand, let alone to perform. However, the role had to be played somehow because, on the one hand, it was her personal goal to understand how the complex figure of Polly could be portrayed on stage. On the other hand, she could not let her teacher down after he had offered her such an important role.

Svetlana told me that Friedmann, as director, used very simple, easily understandable language in rehearsals. He did not have long conversations with the actors, nor did he preach dissident thoughts. He did not even try to explain to his students why he suggested that they perform those scenes from *The Threepenny Opera*. His stage directions were very simple, such as *you go and stay there until I appear, and X stands up while Y walks*. Ultimately, Svetlana's *inner conflict* seemed to be resolved through a combination of the director's simple words and, importantly, the experience of Brecht's text itself. The play was, for Svetlana, so robust, unadorned and excellent, that, when it was repeated several times, it evoked the need for the actor to take an *alienated attitude* towards the situation described in the text. In this way,

Svetlana was able to understand how an alienated style of acting emerged through a process of collective rehearsal of a Brechtian text. It was a perfect case to prove that applying appropriate pedagogy, under artistic laboratory conditions, can contribute to knowledge production, even amongst a group of amateur actors.

As an intellectual artist, Friedmann definitely knew why he was staging those scenes from *The Threepenny Opera* with his students. But he never spoke directly to the young people about his goal, what exactly he wanted to show through those scenes. Svetlana, as a participant in the production, claims that her German teacher used Brecht to educate the adolescents about alienation as a constructive critical stance towards their surrounding reality. For these purposes, no theorized, *enlightening* discussions were needed, as the rehearsals progressed. On the contrary, *academic* instructions of any kind between the teacher and the students were avoided during the rehearsals (although enquiring conversations were not prohibited or intentionally avoided), in order to open up space for learning by doing and the resolution of problems (as in Svetlana's case).

In this regard, Svetlana told me during the interview that, in the end, it was Brecht's texts and songs that helped her out of her inner conflict. In her words, Brecht (and by *Brecht* she meant his dramaturgical precision and cynical bluntness) cannot be removed from the fictitious and acting situation as he forms a mental-intellectual basis for the spoken word. As an actress, Svetlana articulated *Brecht's words*; she described how Brecht's *spoken words* allowed one to speak about the many lies within any one political system. Brecht's dramaturgy gives the actor the opportunity to employ the alienation technique in order to take up an idiosyncratic position on current events. Brecht extends the limits of what is permissible. As Svetlana shared with me, on the one hand, capitalism was criticized through this play, and one took a position on it. But, on the other hand, through one's stance, what Brecht calls an *attitude* (the correspondence of inner mental and outer physical attitude), one saw and began to speak on stage about the numerous lies that one experienced in the existing system. Through one's stance, one expressed on stage the great gap between proclaimed ideas and the actions taken. Back then, in 1982, Svetlana could see the gap between ideas and actions, thanks to the collective staging process.

Today, in the 21st century, after so many changes and upheavals, everything that Svetlana and her stage partners had gleaned back then through Brecht's texts have been confirmed. Thanks to the collective research that contributed to the production, she realized, at that time, that the ideals underpinning socialism were already dead, and only slogans remained. Friedmann embedded in the production the song *The Ballad of Mack the Knife*. This was a direct appeal to the audience and, primarily, to those who sang this song in the production. This song allowed the participants within the fictional situation of the theatre – and theatre was already in opposition to the system at that time – to take a dissident position to the fact that a caste system had long existed in a socialist society that was originally intended as a classless society of equal people. In the Russian translation of Yuli Kim, the line *Мистер Мекки деньги тратит, Мекки-Нож их достаёт* (Mister Mackie is wasting money, Mack the Knife is raising it)¹³ was repeated in the song. It made it possible for the actors on stage to unmask the bureaucrats who violated socialist laws and ideals, but were still hiding behind the façade of socialist slogans. In reality, this violation of the original socialist values mutated into a new state ideology. The privileged existence of the power elites violated both the laws and the philosophical ideas on which that state had originally been built. In this context, such elites seemed little more than criminals in that political reality. And it is this ambiguity of the system, which was so precisely expressed in the main line of the song, that could be denounced by the collective artistic action.

The logic of the selected key scenes – analogous to the logic of Brecht's learning plays – is connected with a dramatic escalation: an extraordinary person, good friend and honored husband is denied help by all those who seem to love and adore him. It happens exactly at the moment when it is a matter of life or death. The choice of the scenes by the teacher was clearly aimed at triggering a process of laboratory research among the students. As is well known, the work on a learning play entails such a staging method, in which, the actors search for the mistake that caused the fatal development within depicted social patterns and the main characters.

Despite the fact that *The Threepenny Opera* was not conceived as a learning play by Brecht, the scenes selected by Yuri Friedmann allowed those involved to spontaneously explore the format of a learning play during the laboratory process. On the one hand, the value system of a capitalist

society was researched. On the other, the actors themselves could identify, within an acting situation, similar socio-cultural characteristics in the then-existing political-economic reality. Through this collective experience in a school theatre studio, through rehearsal and preparation processes, the late-Soviet students gained new knowledge about the political reality which surrounded them at that time. That political reality became apparent to them through the collective effort within the acting situations, which, in turn, described another political system. And although this performance was only an optional school activity that arose through a private initiative and was prepared and rehearsed after classes, it had a prophetic character and proved to be extremely useful just nine years later. In 1991, after the final abolition of the socialist state by the elites, who had long been bribed by the West, the former students were confronted with the concepts and phenomena of the new political and economic reality that they once had seen (and performed!) together on stage. And the ingenious German dramaturge had prepared them in his own way for this reality and warned them about it.

During the interview, Svetlana emphasized several times the fact that she was familiar with Karl Marx and Max Weber's theories of the primitive accumulation of capital from this particular production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Svetlana is convinced that she became acquainted with these theories from her school theatre experience, even before she trained as a lawyer a few years after her drama studies. In other words, the process of preparing and performing *The Threepenny Opera* scenes was a special learning process for the performers that took place outside the ordinary curriculum and turned out to be as useful as regular school lessons. With the help of the scenes staged in an acting style which was analogous to that of a learning play, the students of an ordinary late-Soviet school opened up for themselves (through their roles) the political potential of alienation in theatre. For Svetlana, on the one hand, the aesthetic potential of alienation, applied in an intuitive way, resolved the personal inner conflict described above. On the other hand, this aesthetic potential contributed to her career choice and professional career in the long term. Against this background, this theatre experiment was a real learning play (it would be called in German a *Lernstück*) for the participants: Brecht himself preferred this term to *Lehrstück* (actually a *teaching play*), as the notion of a *learning play* shifts the emphasis from teaching to self-reflective learning.

Self-Reflective Learning in the Laboratory Space

The rehearsal process of the scene – as it was described by the actress involved – demonstrated the most important indicators of Brecht’s learning play. First of all, it was the choice of a *negative* scene (a scene in prison when Macheath’s friends and wife deny him help and, through this treachery, doom him to execution) in which the actors had to perform such anti-social acts that they could not help but distance themselves from the scenic context. This self-reflecting practice (observing, from a distance, a personal process of doing) is the very core of the Brechtian way of *being* and acting in a learning play. Reiner Steinweg, a Brechtian scholar, articulates the goal of *learning by doing*, pointing out the self-reflection of the actor within the acting process:

So something useful for the community is to be taught, but not in a conventional way, but by doing. This, in turn, not in the sense of ‘learning by doing’, but rather the ‘doing’, should be ‘played’ in an arrangement that subjects this doing to one’s own reflection (contemplation), so it enables distance. That is why it does not have to be exemplary, ‘positive’ acts that are demonstrated – it should be antisocial acts as they are of particular importance in this context¹⁴ (Steinweg, 2004, p. 140).

So, in this context, the role of Polly Peachum was for Svetlana an ideal *place* for self-reflection, which enabled her to observe the antisocial acts of her character without evaluating them or trying to interpret their psychological implications. The refusal of any aesthetic evaluation and psychological interpretation of acting, as well as director’s co-acting, emphasize the second indicator of the learning play applied in *The Threepenny Opera* scenes. In this context, Steinweg formulates the following conclusion:

The most important rules of acting [in a learning play] are renouncing both aesthetic evaluation and the psychological interpretation of acting as well as the feedback. The other rules of acting are concentration on the perception, associations and strict retention of the text, which should not be learned by heart, but read. The director himself co-acts, refuses any directing activities and instead concentrates on maintaining the ‘settings’, i.e. adhering to the agreed rules and (quite different) specifications for acting phases¹⁵ (Steinweg, 2004, p. 143).

The question remains as to whether the working conditions established by Friedmann resembled those of a theatre laboratory, how we might

identify or define a theatre laboratory and how the dramaturgical work conducted there might be differentiated from an experiment. It is the focus on observation that connects the *The Threepenny Opera* scenes under discussion with the notion of the theatre laboratory. Schino maintains that what is unique to the theatre laboratory is the process of observation that emerges within the theatre laboratory space:

Theatre laboratory, indeed, indicates not a way of theatre-making but rather a paradoxical way of looking at it. [...] [W]e inverted our gaze and observed not only the working process, but also the remoter zone, the boundary between the *normality* of daily life and the *diversity* of the human being while performing (Schino, 2009, p. 32, italics in original).

The same need for observation was discovered by the founders of the Samuel Beckett Laboratory, Jonathan Heron and Nicholas Johnson:

We try and keep that as simple as possible and ask participants to think about three categories during the process: what they expect, what they observe, and what they learn. I think the category of observation is especially important, because it foregrounds the experimental aspect of the process within a laboratory environment (Heron; Johnson, 2017, p. 285).

The staging of *The Threepenny Opera* school scenes was, undoubtedly, a pedagogical experiment in which Friedmann intended to give the school community, his students and even himself, a special lesson in political training/preparation (as was revealed a decade later, after the great change). He aimed to observe, together with the students, (while eliminating unnecessary explanations¹⁶ during the working process) how a political reality could unfold within a process of embodiment by speaking the simple words of Brecht's play, by using repetitively the line *Mister Mackie is wasting money, Mack the Knife is raising it* from *The Ballad of Mack The Knife*¹⁷. The teacher also attempted to do this by tentatively discovering attitudes (*Haltungen*) in situations of conflict, creating, through a theatre laboratory experiment, "[...] a mental orientation, [...] a signal, important in equal measure for oneself and for others" (Schino, 2009, p. 7). As a man with connections in the Moscow theatre environment, Friedmann understood that the mere direction of such a political performance was not his real aim¹⁸. Creating that performance was just a reason for gathering an *ensemble* of like-minded people among the younger generation and for creating a kind of studio with them in order to delve into research of Brecht's theatre. It could have been a

studio or a theatre laboratory, meaning “[...] first and foremost a mental place, a workshop inside [them]” (Schino, 2009, p. 31). The focus was not on finding a more accurate understanding of drama as studied at the school, but, in fact, to investigate the potential of a laboratory space. As Schino writes, a theatre laboratory is “[...] a parallel dimension of the theatre”, which “[...] cannot be defined with any degree of accuracy”. Which was the case of Friedmann’s venture:

[P]robably, in order to function, it had to escape any definition. Even the existence of important models, such as those of Stanislavski or Grotowski, may lead us astray, since a laboratory cannot be defined according to its intentions or the models it chooses for itself. The term laboratory does not define a concept or a methodological paradigm, but rather *a space*. This space has the same architectural layout as a normal theatre, from which the space reserved for the audience has been amputated. A laboratory is a theatre devised as a home for actors, where the spectators are no longer the bosses but guests. We said: a theatre laboratory is a protected milieu where *time is plentiful*. Time is an essential factor: research depends not on performing a large number of experiments but on giving oneself enough time for specific experiments that seek something precise, and which are organically separate from those performed merely to experiment (Schino, 2009, p. 29, my italics).

In my view, the environment and laboratory space created by Friedmann and his co-actors (in this case it is difficult to call them *students*, because they were participants with equal rights to Friedmann) after classes in the school auditorium was precisely a protected milieu. The participants were given enough time to experiment. It was a lesson in political training, but a lesson not in the form of a lecture or reading a paragraph from a book; rather it was a lesson through the embodiment of a situation from another political reality that, in turn, reflected their political reality, as in a crooked mirror.

Thus, the practical use of the theatre laboratory for Friedmann and his ensemble lay in the “[...] possibility of widening the gap between daily life and performance” (Schino, 2009, p. 77). That gap opened more and more in the course of the repetitive use of Brecht’s texts, so that, within the laboratory space, the frank simplicity, brevity and undisguised truth of the texts became a revelation for the participants. For Svetlana, the school theatre laboratory definitely became, in the words of Phillip Zarrilli, “[...] a

place of erasure, of risk, of loss, and always, as anyone who steps on the stage knows, of potential failure” (Zarrilli, 2002, p. 161). Svetlana experienced the risk of *not* playing Polly Peachum *properly* due to her inner conflict and because, at first, she did not know how to perform the antisocial acts of her character. At the beginning of the rehearsal process, the girl fully realized the possibility of her potential failure in the role if she did not undertake *something* to get out of the trap created by the Socialist Realism insistence on idealized, positive protagonists. It made no sense to oppose Polly Peachum to the wives of the Decembrists who Svetlana so admired; it would only have complicated her comprehension of her artistic task, just as it made no sense to look for the good in the originally negative character of Polly. What really made sense was to observe Friedmann’s scenic work and to pay attention to his reaction to what Svetlana was doing within her role. What was Friedmann’s reaction? He simply did not appear to notice any inner conflict, nor did he address anything that the participants thought was *wrong*. In Svetlana’s words, his communication with them was a kind of playing. While he was directing (and, simultaneously, playing his own role) he seemed not to acknowledge that there could be any kind of conflict or misunderstanding of the Brecht scenes. The teacher assumed that a playful setting and Brecht’s text, constantly repeated in this setting, would put everything in its right place. According to Svetlana’s description, this approach was entirely successful. The teacher/student hierarchy was erased through playful communication, so that a fundamental sense of equality on stage gave the students the inner strength to perform and feel uninhibited. Friedmann’s methods were so unobtrusive, the atmosphere of his production so liberated that Svetlana was able to connect profoundly with Brecht’s text and, consequently, erase the *inner conflict*.

Finally, it was Brecht’s text that helped her to get closer to the challenging role of Polly Peachum: the text she spoke *made* her take a step to the side, observe the behavior of her character and form her own attitude toward Polly. In turn, the forming of a personal attitude to the deceitful behavior of the character in the capitalist system made the actress look at the state of affairs in the socialist system of the late Soviet Union that she lived in at the time. This enabled her to notice the same inconsistency of words and actions within her society as exhibited in the play. Friedmann himself did not express any dissident thoughts to his students, and there

was no ideological debate in his laboratory: ideology was indirectly discussed through the constant repetition of Brecht's text. This, in itself, foregrounded the state of political affairs in the late-Soviet Union, making it visible for the participants, without recourse to explication or ideological discussion within the theatre laboratory.

In Friedmann's laboratory, in "[...] a place protected against any kind of business or commercial logic [that] allow[ed] it to be a social meeting place [...]" (Schino, 2009, p. 9), young people from the school theatre met the unmasked political reality. While speaking the lines of Brecht's characters, the participants realized that in their country – a decade before the dismantling of the socialist system – there existed the same ambiguity as is found in the capitalist society depicted in the text. Such ambiguity prevailed at every level in the socialist society: the elites said one thing but did another. After the transformation of the Bolshevik Party into the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, its new (and far from best) leaders abandoned the main principles of Bolshevism, including its ideology. Some uncertain universal values replaced Marxist, class values and class democracy was replaced by a kind of amorphous democracy. The de facto political elite began to replace the Soviet system by a parliamentary representative system. Having rejected many of the principles of the country's economy, the Communist Party leadership began to introduce bourgeois market principles into the economic system, a serious crisis broke out, creating national problems, and, later, the collapse of the system. The psychology of the characters in *The Threepenny Opera* gave the actors a premonition that in their country everything would change in the direction described in Brecht's play, because the deeds of the elites pointed to that. A school theatre laboratory turned, for those involved, into "[...] a protected, separate place where it [wa]s possible to continuously explore [...], without having to make compromises" (Schino, 2009, p. 9).

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates the way in which working with key scenes from Brecht's play *The Threepenny Opera* might lead to the discovery of another, important methodology underscoring Brecht's work, namely, the learning play. In this case study, this experiment was conducted in 1982, in the socialist society of the late-USSR, in the context of a school

theatre production. The students volunteered to rehearse the selected scenes after class in a school auditorium (a secured space) and, thus, to become equal partners with their teacher. Such a development was possible only within the protected environment of a theatre laboratory, which Friedmann was able to establish. The conditions and processes of their theatre laboratory enabled the participants, through observation, to engender a self-reflecting practice that engaged with Brecht's alienation effect. The amateur actors observed their own process of theatre-making from a distance, tentatively discovering the method of acting, as if they were, indeed, working on a real learning play by Brecht.

This extra-curricular experience of dramaturgy facilitated unplanned research into Brecht's theatre, turning the rehearsals into a special learning process for the students. Interestingly, a decade later, when the Soviet system was replaced by the system and values described in Brecht's play, the participants experienced again, in a real, historic, socio-political context, the political lesson they had encountered in creating their school production. The laboratory environment gave them enough time to experiment and experience a lesson that was not only dramaturgical but also political. The way in which the school production worked on and performed the selected scenes from *The Threepenny Opera* is a rare, even unique, example of the staging of Brecht in a Soviet high school. Even rarer was the experimental format of the production, encompassing, as it did, a theatre laboratory environment which enhanced the knowledge production of those involved.

Notes

- ¹ Between 1992 and 2018 the school had a four-digit number 1269, and since 2018 it has been titled *Moscow International School*.
- ² School theatre in Russia has, undeservedly, received little attention as a socio-anthropological phenomenon, at least during the late-Soviet period, which includes the events described here. School theatre performances were always considered an optional activity, an entertainment that sat outside the curriculum. They took place, for the most part, due to the initiatives of students themselves. However, there are academic sources in the early 20th century referring to early pedagogical steps towards children's theatre (and regarding school theatre as one of its types). Russian and Soviet literary scholar, translator, bibliog-

rapher, and theatre pedagogue Nikolai Bakhtin, referring to the American psychologist Granville Stanley Hall, recommended that parents develop the innate *dramatic instinct* in their children in a targeted manner. Hall is convinced that “[...] [p]lay, dancing, story-telling and hearing, the moving picture and pageantry and the theatre are perhaps nearer to the inmost nature of children than anything else; and the clear, up-to-date, temperate presentation of these themes [...] should be known to every intelligent parent and teacher” (Curtis, 2009, p. 14). Bakhtin cites Hall’s observation that: “The dramatic instinct [...] is exhibited in children’s extraordinary love for theatre and cinema and in their passion for independent role-playing games” (Bakhtin, 1911, p. 185, my translation of this source). Issues of theatre for children and school theatre were also discussed in 1916 at the first all-Russian Session of the founders of the People’s Theatre. The section on schooling passed a resolution on the problems of school theatre and theatre for children. It concluded that the dramatic instinct inherent in the nature of children, which comes to light at an early age, should be used for educational purposes. The resolution also stated that, when erecting new school buildings, attention should be paid to the rooms in which theatrical performances will be produced (comp. in Vserossiyski..., 1916, p. 60). In the Soviet period, rooms for theatrical performances were also taken into account in the planning of school buildings: every school building that I visited as a schoolgirl (e.g. during the all-school competitions in various disciplines) was provided with an auditorium, which, through its very existence, required the staging, implementation and hosting of diverse artistic events. In the end, it remains at the discretion of each school to develop this historical tradition in one form or another, just as the then Hermann Matern School originated its theatrical tradition in the late 1970s.

- ³ About this theatrical school tradition see my article available at: <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2237-26602019000100201&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=en&ORIGINALLANG=en>. Accessed on: May 21, 2021.
- ⁴ See Vladimir Vysotski’s simple stage costume which he wore for his glorious role of Hamlet in Moscow Taganka Theatre in 1971. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-39ojFdnio>>. Accessed on: May 21, 2021.
- ⁵ See endnote 13.
- ⁶ Another participant of the 16th symposium of the International Brecht Society, Sergey Romashko, told me during a discussion that he once came across many

original German Reclam editions of Brecht's works in such an antique bookstore in the 1970s. Among them he discovered the book *Refugee Talks* which was banned in the USSR. Romashko also saw Lyubimov's rare performance *The Life of Galileo* at the Taganka Theatre. As a ticket for that production could only be obtained through relationships, i.e. friends or relatives, it was Romashko's lucky chance to get such a ticket through his father-in-law, who as a KGB colonel ordered it from *his* people.

- ⁷ It is an essential feature of Brecht's Epic Theatre that an actor separates himself from his role sufficiently to show his attitude to it, to history, and to the present (Comp. in Hayman, 1969, p. 47). Both this provocative feature of Epic Theatre and Brecht's developments of a *documentary* type of presentation concealed the danger of showing through acting one's attitude to the flaws of the late Soviet system. That is why the Soviet authorities avoided the popularization of Brecht's theatrical concepts and oeuvre among the population. There remains a lack of research into this cultural-historical phenomenon. Above all, it is obvious that Brecht, *the man who argued that the nature of performance had changed in modern times* (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zxn4mp3/revision/9>), and his concept of Epic Theatre would have strongly competed with or even supplanted Stanislavski's naturalistic theatre of illusion in the changed times of the late 20th century, if it had been officially popularized in the late USSR.
- ⁸ The great impact of the production could be evidenced by the other young teacher, Elena Dayeva (then known in the school under her maiden-name Anikeyeva), who starred in the play as Low-Dive Jenny (one more radically challenging aspect of the school play was that a teacher played a prostitute on stage alongside her students). During a telephone interview, Elena revealed that the production was performed several times in the school. She remembered that members of the district education committee who had been invited by the school director to see the production, brought along an Austrian television crew (who were by chance on a business trip in Moscow at that time) to watch the production. After the show, the Austrian representative suggested that they could make a video recording of the piece and present it for educational purposes at Austrian schools. Unfortunately, the filming did not take place, as Elena refused to record her performance due to family reasons.
- ⁹ My translation of this source.
- ¹⁰ Original in German: *durchführung bestimmter handlungsweisen, einnahme bestimmter haltungen, wiedergabe bestimmter reden.*

- ¹¹ This high-spiritual collective work of students and teachers points out an attempt to install an applied philosophical practice – anthroposophy – more common in Waldorf schools. When looking at that collective socio-performative practice from a research point of view, it becomes clear that this socio-educational cultural project was in line with the aims of anthroposophy, a practical science concerned with human nature. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, said: “In Waldorf school pedagogy, we do not educate spiritually because we want to have a one-sided effect on spirit and soul, but we educate spiritually because we know that in the most eminent sense we educate physically the inner being of man that lies under his skin” (Steiner, 2020, p. 87). [Original in German: *In der Waldorfschulpädagogik erziehen wir nicht deshalb geistig-seelisch, weil wir in einseitiger Weise auf das Geistig-Seelische wirken wollen, sondern wir erziehen geistig-seelisch aus dem Grunde, weil wir wissen, daß wir damit im eminentesten Sinne das Innere des Menschen, das innerhalb seiner Haut gelegen ist, physisch erziehen*]. This particular staging experience, as well as the theatrical tradition it initiated in Hermann Matern School, appeared steeped in such a spiritual educating method, regarding the anthroposophical roots of Hermann Matern School, see my aforementioned article.
- ¹² See, for example, an article about the wife of the Decembrist Nikita Muravyov, Aleksandrina Muravyova, in: *Работница: журнал для женщин и семьи, Москва: Издательский дом Работница* [*Rabotnitsa: journal for women and family*. – Moscow: publishing house *Rabotnitsa*], n. 6, p. 16-18, 1965.
- ¹³ See the text of the Russian translation of *The Ballad of Mack the Knife*: Available at: <https://45parallel.net/yuliy_kim/ballada_o_mekki-nozhe.html>. Accessed on: May 21, 2021, as well as the performance of this song by the Russian actor Andrey Mironov in the production of *The Threepenny Opera* in Moscow Theatre of Satire in 1980: Available at: <http://sovetskaya-estrada.ru/load/mironov_andrej/quot_pesnja_mekki_nozha_quot/114-1-0-2003>. Accessed on: May 21, 2021.
- ¹⁴ My translation of this source. Original in German: Es soll also etwas für die Gemeinschaft Nützlich gelehrt werden, aber nicht auf herkömmliche Weise, sondern durch Tun. Dies wiederum nicht im Sinne „learning by doing“, sondern die „Taten“ sollen „gespielt“ werden, in einem Arrangement, das dieses Tun schon im Vollzug der eigenen Reflexion (Betrachtung) unterwirft, also Distanz dazu ermöglicht. Deshalb müssen es auch keineswegs vorbildliche,

„positive“ Taten sein, die dargestellt werden – gerade den asozialen Taten kommt in diesem Verwendungszusammenhang eine besondere Bedeutung zu.

- ¹⁵ My translation of this source. Original in German: Die wichtigsten Spielregeln sind Verzicht auf ästhetische Bewertung und auf psychologisierende Deutung des Spiels und der Rückmeldungen, Konzentration auf die Wahrnehmungen und Assoziationen und strenge Beibehaltung des Textes, der nicht auswendig gelernt werden darf, sondern abgelesen werden soll. Der Spielleiter spielt selbst mit, verzichtet auf jegliche Regietätigkeit und konzentriert sich stattdessen auf die Wahrung des „settings“, d.h. die Einhaltung der vereinbarten Regeln und (durchaus unterschiedlichen) Vorgaben für einzelne Spielphasen.
- ¹⁶ As Phillip Zarrilli suggests, the studio is not a place for discussion, debates or arguments. “The studio – a location where words ‘count’ less...but, where ideas, intellect, and the imagination are forged through an embodied practice where the words must ‘speak’ unseen, or be purposefully shown and displayed [...]. The studio...a place of hypothesis, and therefore a place of possibility...where something can come of nothing” (Zarrilli, 2002, p. 160). This explains why Yuri Friedmann employed the same tactic and spoke little with his students during the rehearsals.
- ¹⁷ The repetitive use of the same words is also a feature of a learning play format as Reiner Steinweg postulates: “The focus of the learning play is to examine the attitudes (Haltungen) that are applied in conflicts or conflict situations. First of all, this is made possible by the fact that the same words are spoken over and over when acting, so that, in contrast to the role play, attention automatically shifts away from the familiar words to changing attitudes, tones and facial expressions” (My translation of this source.) Original in German: *Die Untersuchung der Haltungen, die in Konflikten oder konfliktiven Situationen eingenommen werden, steht im Zentrum des Lehrstückspiels. Das wird erstens dadurch ermöglicht, dass im Spiel immer wieder die gleichen Worte gesprochen werden, die Aufmerksamkeit sich also – im Unterschied zum Rollenspiel – nach einiger Zeit automatisch von den allen bekannten Worten weg auf die wechselnden Haltungen, Tonfälle und die Mimik verschiebt [...]* (Steinweg, 2004, p. 142).
- ¹⁸ Heron and Johnson made the same observation about the constant lack of a concrete goal while researching in a theatre laboratory: “One of the curious things about such a hopeful practice, [...] within the practice of the laboratory – is the lack of a promise that it will deliver something, some final outcome. Perhaps it’s actually the absence of that promise – the absence of an ends-

focused discourse or a kind of final unity that it will reach – that enables this practice” (Heron; Johnson 2017, p. 285).

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