

## Medical student Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)

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**Summary:** Bertolt Brecht was one of the most important dramatists of the 20th century. At the start of his career he studied literature but switched from the humanities to medicine. This paper discusses reasons for this switch, the influence of his medical experiences on his poetic work and why he eventually abandoned his medical career. His political development towards Marxism is described and a short sketch of his theory of theatre is given. He is considered the most important German-speaking dramatist of the 20th century.

Eugen Berthold<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Brecht, later known as Bertholt Brecht, was born on 10 February 1898 in Augsburg, Bavaria, as the first son of Berthold and Sophie Brecht. Two years later his brother Walter (1900–86) was born. Though father Berthold was not at all an erudite man, who had graduated only from elementary school, he became the director of the commercial department of a paper mill. His political attitude is described as moderate conservative. Allegedly, there were very few books in the household. Nevertheless, Berthold senior loved music and was the tenor in a local glee club; it was his wish that his sons learn to play a musical instrument. Berthold junior tried the piano and the violin without much success but he was a good guitar player. At school things went more or less well.

Bertholt Brecht was never the top of the class but he never failed. His favourite subjects were Latin and German. As to the sciences, his achievements were only satisfactory. It is said that he was a voracious reader and it was his father who, even though not at all interested in literature, gave him the complete works of Frank Wedekind (1864–1918), the enfant terrible of the German theatre.

Given his love for language and literature, Brecht consequently participated in a pupil magazine called *Die Ernte (The Harvest)* published in 1913. From August 1914 onwards he wrote articles for the newspaper *Augsburger Neueste Nachrichten*. Thus it seems only natural that, after receiving his high school diploma in 1917, he decided to study literature (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

### Military service

If the doctor ordered me: 'Amputate a leg, Brecht!', I would answer: 'Yes, your Excellency' and cut off the leg. If I was told: 'Make a trepanning', I opened the man's skull and tinkered with his brains ...<sup>3</sup>

Bertolt Brecht as trauma – or neuro-surgeon? Why not? It is well known that the poet of *The Threepenny Opera* served during the war as a medical orderly in a military

hospital. On 14 January 1918 he had to present himself at the medical examination commission of the 1st Army Corps in Augsburg and was found fully fit to serve at the frontline. Even an overdose of pure coffee, drunk just before the examination in order to simulate a circulatory disturbance, could not avoid this result.<sup>4</sup> The captain obviously was not impressed. At least Brecht did not have to serve at the frontline. But from 1 October 1918 he became a soldier in the medical corps or, to put it precisely, an orderly at the Augsburg



Figure 1 Brecht at the age of 20, details unknown

Military Hospital. Brecht's father, certainly not without influence, petitioned for Brecht's release from the front line. But the decision is thought to be mainly a result of the fact that Brecht had been enrolled at a medical faculty since May 1918 and, due to a lack of medical staff, medical students were released from service at the frontline. Having been enrolled in the humanities since the winter of 1917 at the University of Munich, in May 1918 Brecht wrote to his then girlfriend Paula Bahnholzer: 'I switched to medicine – what a trouble!'<sup>5</sup>

Some authors claim that Brecht studied medicine from the beginning of his academic life.<sup>6</sup> This is clearly incorrect for in the letter to Paula he uses the verb 'umschreiben' ('to switch'), not 'einschreiben' ('to enroll'). It is clear that a German native speaker would not confuse these verbs.

### Attitude towards bourgeois society and Marxism

Medicine and poetry is a combination that is anything but rare in the history of German thought, where names such as Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) and Georg Büchner (1813–37) come to mind. But even of Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170–1220),<sup>7</sup> a 13th-century author, it is said that he was a medical doctor, due in largely to the description of a chest tap in his main work *Parzival*.<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Schiller is said to have written his most famous work, *The Robbers*, during his night-shifts in the military hospital where he served. If this is true, one can easily imagine how many masterpieces (not only of German literature) have gone unwritten due to the increased workload during today's night-shifts compared with those of the 18th century.

To Georg Büchner we owe an interesting insight into clinical research in the early 19th century: 'Take a look at this man: for three months he has eaten nothing else than peaches; notice the effect, what an irregular pulse!'<sup>9</sup> Büchner, socio-critical poet of early expressionism, is said to have been an example to Brecht, a theory that served to explain Brecht's sudden switch from the humanities to medicine.<sup>10</sup> Thus, had Brecht 'on the track of those great writers whose scientific analysis revealed [to] us the essential insights into the reality of our scientific era'<sup>11</sup> as Walter Jens, German literary critic, once put it? Probably not, given the fact that at that time Brecht wasn't a severe critic of the bourgeois society and not at all a Marxist. Those developments started only after his move to Berlin in the late 1920s where he came under the influence of the Marxist theorist Karl Korsch (1886–1961) in whose evening classes on Marxism and working class movement he took part. Maybe they were caused by an event that occurred during a demonstration in 1929: 'More than 20 demonstrators were killed then. When Brecht heard the shots and saw the people being hit, he became as pale as I never saw him before in my life', remembered Fritz Sternberg, one of Brecht's comrades at that time.<sup>12</sup>

When World War I broke out on 1 August 1914 there was a general enthusiasm among the German academic youth (the 'Augusterlebnis') and even Brecht was caught up in it. Since 8 August 1914 he had published

patriotic articles and poems in his hometown newspaper *Augsburger Neuesten Nachrichten*, eulogies on the Emperor and the army. He praised the 'spiritual power' of William II who 'didn't intend the war' and justified the war as indispensable: 'The firm German character, for two centuries built by German poets and thinkers, now proves its worth ... All Germans fear God and nothing else in the world'.<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to believe that this was not Brecht's true point of view. His girlfriend later confirmed that he adored the Emperor and the army and was really crazy about their deeds.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that the slowing down in the advance of the German troops also diminished Brecht's patriotism: At the end of 1915 or early in 1916 the class had to write an essay on Horace's phrase 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. Brecht omitted 'pro patria' and concentrated on 'mori'. In his opinion death was never sweet, not in bed nor on the battlefield. Only morons would believe it was easy to die and even then only as long as they felt secure and far away from death.<sup>15</sup>

There is further evidence that Brecht was not a Marxist at that time. After the breakdown of the German Empire, the power in the capitals was assumed by councils of soldiers and workmen. The aim was to build a republic of workers' and soldiers' councils as had recently been done in Soviet Russia. On 28 November 1918 Brecht was elected a member of the council in Augsburg, not for his left wing position but for his eloquence and his courage, supported by the unusual clothes he wore during his service. Rather than uniform he preferred yellow shoes, yellow gloves, a sweater and a walking stick. His comrades expected him 'to dare something'<sup>16</sup> but he did not. He left the council when he was dismissed from the army. Ten years later he described the situation as follows: 'They landed me with a lot of work ... but very soon I achieved my dismissal'.<sup>17</sup> His opinion on Marxism is reported by his friend Hanns Otto Münsterer: 'Marxism is a disease that will be overcome ...'<sup>18</sup>

### Baal and the Bavarian revolution

After leaving the council Brecht had hardly anything to do with the revolution. During the turmoil in Munich he practised horse-riding, fell off the horse and was hurt. The young Brecht's most famous play, *Baal*, was already finished, Brecht only carried out slight changes in some scenes.<sup>19</sup>

It is undoubtedly true that he was in contact with the Independent German Social Democratic Party (USPD).<sup>20</sup> In 1935 he claimed to have been a member of that party but his name has not been found in the party's archive.<sup>21</sup> When the Easter revolution in 1919 was put down, its leaders had to flee to save their lives. Many were executed, as Brecht's brother Walter, then a member of the counter-revolutionary Free Corps Epp, reported. It is said that Brecht hid a certain Georg Prem, one of the leaders of the Augsburgian Section of the USPD, in his apartment. However, Brecht's brother claims 'my brother was in no situation a hero'.<sup>22</sup>

It really seems that for the young Brecht bohemians, such as dramatist Frank Wedekind,<sup>23</sup> were much more attractive than revolution and communism: on the occasion of Wedekind's death Brecht published an obituary on 12 March 1918 in the *Neuesten Nachrichten* and called him the 'great educator of Europe'.<sup>24</sup> And it is probably not by chance that Brecht's first son was called Frank, and not Georg. *Baal* is written in the, in those days, popular wedekindian style.

There can be no doubt his main interest was literature and theatre. Before and after switching to medicine he attended the seminars of Professor Artur Kutscher (1878–1960), a then famous literature critic. Another participant of Kutscher's seminars was the future Nazi minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945), at that time a student of German literature.<sup>25</sup> It is not known whether he and Brecht ever met. One of Kutscher's seminars initiated *Baal*. It seems that Brecht struggled to become Kutscher's favourite student but did not succeed. Kutscher considered him 'not talented'. Brecht in turn made a pun out of Kutscher's name: he called him 'Leichen-Kutscher'.<sup>26</sup>

Kutscher's favourite was Hanns Johst (1890–1978) who, under the National Socialists, became the head of the National Writer's Association (Reichsschrifttumskammer) and General of the SS. When in March 1918 Johst's play *Der Einsame* (*The Lonely One*) was published, Brecht decided to compose a counterpart. The work on *Baal* was started. Comparing both plays one will notice that the sequence of the scenes and the composition of the characters in *Baal* is very similar to *Der Einsame*. In a letter dated 1 May 1918 he told his friend Hanns Münsterer that *Baal* was almost finished.<sup>27</sup> This is long before the revolutionary turmoil in Munich started, which suggests lack of any revolutionary intention in *Baal*. Be it a masterpiece or not, it seems to be the result of Brecht's envy of his rival and his admiration for Wedekind.

In any case, he showed no special interest in the natural sciences. His turn towards positivism and his interest in the philosophy of the 'Vienna Circle' in the late 1920s is probably a consequence of his sympathy for Marxism, given the fact that both theories share the same materialistic base. A statement regarding psychoanalysis, such as the following from a letter from 1944, is unthinkable for the young Brecht:

Of course the psychoanalysis causes a different pleasure, that is to spend as much money as possible for your own person. The psychoanalysts ascribe a strong healing power to paying – the patient takes them serious because he pays them. Very serious because he pays very much.<sup>28</sup>

## Medical practice?

Allegedly Brecht switched to medicine in order to be able to help his mother who suffered from cancer or else he intended to take over the medical practice of his girlfriend's father. The coincidence of change in subjects and draft is striking, particularly since his schoolmate Rudolf Prestel, who lost a leg at the front-line, made the horror of war quite clear to Brecht.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, it seems that his scientific and medical career was limited to participation in some lectures on descriptive anatomy, infectious diseases, experimental physiology and anthropology; and to experiments in inorganic chemistry. He was never seen in the dissection room.<sup>30</sup>

And what about the amputations and trepannings he allegedly performed?

Brecht reflected hypothetically on what he would have done if he had had to serve on a surgical ward. But this was never the case, although there are authors who claim that in the military hospital he saw some of the worst cases of mutilation and that these impressions found direct reflection in his antiwar poems.<sup>31</sup> It is possible there were severely injured patients in the hospital but Brecht was not in contact with them. From 1 October 1918 to 9 January 1919, the day he left the army, he spent the whole time on ward D, reserved – except for some cases of dysentery – exclusively for patients with venereal diseases.

One may ask whether there is any evidence that Brecht was really interested in medicine? It seems he was not really so, even though later he often emphasized his scientific education.<sup>32</sup> During his time in the military hospital he had had the opportunity to practise medicine. But as far as we know he did almost nothing. His main duty was to give an evening report on the day's events to the captain of the ward. Some days he sent his family's maid to do this for him.<sup>33</sup> At least in terms of the history of literature the period on ward D was not without importance: Brecht used his experiences with those with venereal diseases to write *The Song Dedicated to the Gentlemen of Ward D*, of which only the final verse remains:

Oh how you were burnt by the flames of love  
When you were young and keen.  
But man's nature is so rough,  
He blows his fellow man to smithereens.<sup>34</sup>

Probably the 'Legend of the Dead Soldier', which later was entitled 'Ballad of the Dead Soldier' and which appeared in Act 4 of *Drums in the Night*, was written during Brecht's time in hospital, too.<sup>35</sup> However, the effect of this ballad was tremendous: it is said that due to that song the National Socialists put Brecht's name in fifth place on a list of persons immediately to be arrested after the assumption of power.<sup>36</sup> As to his studies, Brecht did not participate in the subsequent semester from February to the end of March 1920 that was obligatory for former soldiers. In February 1920 he told a friend of his intention to abandon his studies in order to become a playwright.<sup>37</sup> He never graduated, either in the Humanities or in medicine.

## Playwright and refugee

After leaving university Brecht (Figure 2) started to work as a dramatist at the 'Residenztheater' in Munich and after his move to Berlin in the mid-20s at the 'Deutsches Theater'. He continued publishing plays and invented a new type of dramaturgy: according to



Figure 2 Brecht at the age of 30; one of four picture postcards taken in Augsburg which show him in his usual appearance during the 1920s: leather jacket and cigar

the common dramaturgy noted by Aristotle in his 'Poetics', the spectator should be moved by the fate of the hero of a play. According to Brecht the play should be staged in a way that gives the spectator, like a visitor to a planetarium, the opportunity to identify the motives behind the action. The motto is: 'That's the way it is, but it need not remain this way. It can be changed'.

When the National-Socialists came to power Brecht had to emigrate from Germany. His flight took him to Denmark, Sweden and, after a short stay in Moscow, finally to Hollywood, USA, where he tried to work as a script author as he had already done in Germany at the beginning of his career. But only one of his scripts has ever been accepted by a Hollywood studio – 'Hangmen Also Die' – directed by Fritz Lang.<sup>38</sup>

Since his wife Helene Weigel (1900–71) was Austrian, after the war Brecht obtained Austrian citizenship but lived in East Berlin where he founded the theatre 'Berliner Ensemble' (Figure 3). On 14 August 1956 he died unexpectedly from myocardial infarction.<sup>39</sup> Though doubtless a supporter of Marxism, Brecht had never been a member of the party. Due to



Figure 3 Brecht at the age of 56 (two years before his death) in his summer residence in Buckow near Berlin

his early death it remains unclear how his relationship to the rulers in East Germany would have developed.

Bertolt Brecht is buried in the 'Dorotheenstädter Friedhof' in Berlin (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Brecht and his wife's gravesites in Berlin

## Conclusions

We have seen that Brecht was enrolled formally at the faculty of medicine and that he attended some lessons on scientific topics. But we have also seen that he never practised medicine and that he abandoned his studies almost as soon as possible. He was a medical truant but he often claimed to have been influenced by his scientific education. In a text written in 1935 he explains his attitude towards Marxism by the scientific character of this political philosophy. As a former student of science he had been attracted more by arguments than by emotions.<sup>40</sup>

The leading role of arguments is also one of the most important features of Brecht's theory of theatre, the so-called 'Epic theatre'. In the 1930s Brecht published several texts concerning his theory. He compares the Aristotelian dramaturgy with a merry-go-round (*Karussell* and hence the 'K-type' of dramaturgy). The K-type transforms the spectator for a short period of time into a king, a lover, a revolutionary and so on. The performance induces emotions since the spectator identifies himself with the characters on stage. He says: 'That's me, that's natural, that's the way it is and ever will be. I laugh with the laughing ones and cry with the crying ones'.<sup>41</sup> According to Aristotle the spectator is purified of fear and pity by this mechanism called 'katharsis'.<sup>42</sup>

The new system is called P-type ('planetarium'). Like the visitor to a planetarium the spectator shall discover the mechanisms behind the action on the stage. The spectator says: 'That's extremely remarkable, that must be stopped because there is a way out. I laugh at the crying ones and cry over the laughing ones'.<sup>43</sup> The way to reach this attitude is the V-effect ('*Verfremdung*', 'alienation'), a way of acting that turns the usual into the remarkable and conspicuous.<sup>44</sup>

Has this something to do with medicine? Certainly it has to do with materialism and rationalism. It is not by chance that Brecht started to invent his theory after his 'conversion' to Marxism. The more he was convinced by the materialistic philosophy, the more he developed his system of theatre in this direction.

It seems probable that Brecht really was interested in science but his interest was obviously focused on the theoretical aspects and not on the practice of science. His inclination towards rationalism made him susceptible to Marxism and there is no reason to believe that without that 'medical episode' he would not have developed his theory of theatre.

## References and notes

- 1 The spelling is unclear. On the birth certificate it is 'Berthold', Brecht himself wrote 'Bertolt' or 'Bert'. Mittenzwei W. *Das Leben des Bertolt Brecht*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987:19
- 2 *Ibid.*: pp. 9–58
- 3 Tretjakow S. Bert Brecht. *International Literature* (Moscow) 1937;5:60–70
- 4 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 77
- 5 Letter to Paula Bahnholzer. In: Brecht B: *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*. Berlin und Frankfurt: Aufbau und Suhrkamp, 1993;28:55
- 6 Frisch W, Obermeier KW. *Brecht in Augsburg*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976
- 7 Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805). Together with Johann Wolfgang Goethe Germany's most popular poet. Being the son of a doctor he was forced to study fist law and then medicine although he would have preferred theology. Thanks to his friend Goethe he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the University of Jena. Since he was strongly interested in history his plays often focus on historic characters like Joan of Arc or Mary Stuart. Georg Büchner (1813–37), son of a doctor, studied medicine. Being an opponent of the reigning prince of Hesse he had to leave the country and became professor of anatomy in Zurich where he died from typhus. In his most famous play *Woyzeck* he describes the true case of the mentally ill soldier Franz Woyzeck who kills his wife and then commits suicide. Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1170–1220), writer and minstrel. Almost nothing is known about his life. Maybe he took part in the third crusade under Frederick Barbarossa and Richard Lionheart. He wrote poems and courtly novels, often in a dark and enigmatic style
- 8 Haage B. Urjans Heilung nach der 'Chirurgia' des Abu L-Quasim. *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 1985;104:357–67
- 9 Büchner G. *Woyzeck*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996:13
- 10 Haas W. *Bert Brecht* (Köpfe des XX. Jh., Vol. 7). Berlin: Colloquium, 1958;7:23 Bornemann E. Ein Epitaph für Bertolt Brecht. *Sinn und Form* 1957;2:149
- 11 Jens W. *Statt einer Literaturgeschichte*. Pfullingen: Neske, 1962:229
- 12 Sternberg F. *Der Dichter und die Ratio. Erinnerungen an Bertolt Brecht*. Göttingen: Sachse & Pohl, 1963:25
- 13 *Notizen über unsere Zeit*. In: Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 21, p. 12. In the same tenor are the articles *Turmwatch* (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 21:7 or the poems *Der belgische Acker* (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 13, p. 83, *Der Kaiser* (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 13, p. 76, *Französische Bauern* (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 13, p. 85, and many more
- 14 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 41 and footnote 34
- 15 Unfortunately, the essay on Horace has not survived. What we have is the memory of one of Brecht's classmates, published in 1949. Schmidt D. *'Baal' und der junge Brecht*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1966
- 16 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 84
- 17 Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5)
- 18 Schmidt D (op. cit. ref. 15): p. 37
- 19 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 103
- 20 *Ibid.*: 94. The left-wingers of the 'German Social Democratic Party' left the party in April 1917 and founded the USPD. For the history of the SPD/USPD see: Erdmann KD. *Der erste Weltkrieg*. In: Grundmann H, ed. *Gebhardt. Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte*. 22 Vols. Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag: München, 1997;18:184
- 21 Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 22, pp. 138, 927
- 22 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 101

- 23 Benjamin Franklin ('Frank') Wedekind (1864–1918), son of a German doctor and an American actress. Journalist, actor, and playwright whose plays prevalently deal with sex and erotica
- 24 Quotation from: Schmidt D (op. cit. ref. 15): p. 2
- 25 Reusch RG. *Goebbels. Eine Biographie*. München: Piper, 1995:52
- 26 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): 64. 'Kutscher' = 'coachman', 'Leichen' = 'dead bodies'. 'Leichen-Kutscher' = he who drives a hearse
- 27 Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 28, p. 50
- 28 Ibid.: vol. 23, p. 47
- 29 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 76
- 30 Ibid: pp. 60, 62. Brecht (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 28, p. 55
- 31 Bornemann E (op. cit. ref. 10): p. 149
- 32 Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 22, pp. 68, 138
- 33 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 79
- 34 Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 1, p. 11
- 35 Ibid.: vol. 1, pp. 322–323; Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 59
- 36 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): p. 81
- 37 Hecht W. *Brecht-Chronik 1898–1956*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998: 80, 86
- 38 For Brechts's time in Hollywood see: Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): vol. 2, pp. 7–135. For the stages of his flight: Hecht W (op. cit. ref. 37): pp. 349–754
- 39 Mittenzwei W (op. cit. ref. 1): vol. 2, pp. 356–71, 662
- 40 Brecht B (op. cit. ref. 5): vol. 22, p. 68
- 41 Ibid.: p. 110
- 42 Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 2002:19–25
- 43 Ibid
- 44 Ibid.: p. 211. A table, published in 1935, displaying the main differences between the two systems (1935;22:109)