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Introduction to "What's Your Status: Exploring Brecht's Idea of HALTUNG though Keith Johnstone's Status Exercises

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In the political climate surrounding the 2016 US presidential election and its wake, the plays of Bertolt Brecht are produced in professional and university theatres with renewed energy. Several universities will produce *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mother Courage* this season, and Brecht's lesser known plays, such as *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, gain new attention in professional venues for the relevancy of their critique of Hitler's rise to power in Nazi Germany. I have found students in university classes—ranging from production courses to general distribution requirements—fascinated and enlivened when we study Brecht's theories, especially when actively demonstrated through performances of his *Lehrstücke*, or "learning-plays," and songs. Hungry for alternative practices to support aims of resistance and protest, students' interests perk when Brecht's aesthetics are connected to his political goals, or connections made between his theories and related contemporary concepts regarding, for example, the performance of gender. Even, and perhaps especially, Brecht's aims of revolution—dismissed only a few years ago for their connection to what many argued was the demonstrated failure of larger Marxist projects—enjoy new attention in university classrooms with the reinvigoration of socialist revolutionary politics. In the following essay, Bill Gelber at Texas Tech University describes his process connecting the practices and theories of Brecht in teaching and production. Using the more recent status techniques of British director Keith Johnstone, Gelber documents his successes teaching even the most complex of Brecht's aesthetic theories, such as *Halting* and *Gestus*, for use by actors in performance. (Please see the note on style for German words and foreign spellings at the end of this essay.)

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY ANN M. SHANAHAN

WHAT IS YOUR STATUS?

USING KEITH JOHNSTONE'S EXERCISES WITH BERTOLT BRECHT'S CONCEPT OF *HALTUNG* IN THE CLASSROOM AND REHEARSAL HALL

BY BILL GELBER TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY



FIG. 1 *Mother Courage* (Kelsey Fisher-Waits) sings "The Song of the Great Capitulation" to the Soldier (James Macon Grant) and the audience. *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Texas Tech University, 2015 PHOTO Tif Holmes

Teaching graduate seminars on the life and works of Bertolt Brecht and in recent rehearsals for a production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* at Texas Tech University (Fig. 1), I used British director and teacher Keith Johnstone's status exercises to explore Brecht's idea of *Halting*. This key aspect of Brecht's theory, most often translated as "attitude," "stance," or "bearing," can sometimes be challenging for actors trained primarily in realism and naturalism to understand and execute. Johnstone created his exercises for the Royal Court Studio in response to seeing the Moscow Art Theatre production of *The Cherry Orchard* in 1964. He observed that while the actors performed in a naturalistic playing style they seemed unnatural to him nonetheless: "Everyone onstage seemed to have chosen the strongest possible motives for each action....The effect was 'theatrical' but not like life as I knew it" (*Impra* 33). For Johnstone, the acting style failed to portray how survival instincts shape behavior in social circumstances. Brecht likewise considered naturalism a "superficial representation of reality" and developed his form of theatre in order to show "the real social forces operating under the immediately visible surface" (205). Because both directors share interest in revealing underlying social factors on stage, I have found Johnstone's status exercises offer a good point of entry for actors in the classroom and rehearsal hall to comprehend and more readily apply Brecht's ideas. In this essay, I outline how teachers and directors may productively combine the theories of Johnstone and Brecht in order to foster complex characterizations that reflect the socio-political forces operating in plays.

HALTUNG OR "ATTITUDE"

When Bertolt Brecht founded the Berliner Ensemble in 1949, he trained his new company in practices he had been formulating for many years. Brecht stressed that human behavior changes according to shifts in relationship and circumstance. These changes reflect social conditioning that both motivates actions and limits choices. Brecht sought ways his company could communicate the complexity of this changing behavior and its social causes on stage. Once Brecht and his production team determined a shared socio-political analysis of the story of the piece, called the *Fabel* (generally translated as "fable" in English), the work in rehearsals began with careful placement of actors in scenes to reflect social relationships (Fig. 2). Brecht described these socially meaningful staging configurations, which he called "groupings" or "arrangements" as: "... not just an effect or a 'purely aesthetic' phenomenon, conducive to formal beauty. They are a part of a theatre of grand subjects for the new social order, and they cannot be achieved without deep understanding and passionate support of the new structure of human relations" (269).

Within these arrangements, Brecht asked that each actor adopt an attitude or stance for the person they portrayed towards the other people in the scene and/or events. This attitude, which Brecht called the *Halting*, signified the means whereby actors' observations "of human relations" could be expressed. In the introduction to the third edition of *Brecht on Theatre*, editors Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn explain the meaning and function of the term:

The German etymology relates it to the common verb *halten* (to hold), as well as to the familiar nouns *Verhalten* (behaviour) and *Verhältnis* (relationship).... and [it] can mean both 'attitude' in the intellectual sense of a cognitive category and 'stance' in the pragmatic sense of physical comportment, combining what is usually a mental state in English