BRECHT ON ACTING FOR THE 21st CENTURY:
INTERROGATING AND RE-INScribing THE FIXED
Meg Mumford

As a spect/actor and teacher/learner facing the twenty-first century, I would argue that one aspect of Brecht's approach to acting that will leap with us into the new century is his desire to interrogate seemingly fixed ways of organizing, viewing and representing the world. By 'fixed,' I mean treated as 'given,' 'natural,' 'normal,' 'familiar,' 'assumed to be true' and thus 'unquestionably perpetuated.' Something fixed is closed, supposedly complete within itself and thus exclusive. The desire to 'unfix' permeates Brecht's attempt to demonstrate through theatre practice how, why and for whom certain behaviours, relations and representations are constructed AND the mutability of such constructs. Given our position within an age of information technology and world-wide bureaucratization, characterized by an expanding welter of images, sign systems and organizational patterns, I would predict that Brecht's interrogative endeavour will remain a source of inspiration for interrogative theatre of the immediate future.

Likewise, the shortcomings of Brecht's questioning, the moments when in unfixing one oppressive structure he asserts another, is also an important legacy. In our post-Brecht age marked by the 'global expansion of capitalism and its more dispersed social struggles,' a dispersal manifest in the proliferation of marginalized groups not adequately represented within a Marxist class-oriented framework, Brecht's interrogations begin to appear problematically fixed around a limited number of so-called 'fundamental' oppositions - such as that between forces and relations of production, or between wage-labour and capital. The exclusive nature of Brecht's structural analyses have been challenged on many fronts from the post-structuralist to the materialist feminist. Here I want to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of Brecht's assault on fixures by looking at two acting strategies central to his interruptive theatre. The strategies are, firstly, the 'fixing of the "not-but"' and secondly the dialectical interplay of opposites.

PART ONE:
Fixing the 'Not-But': In her article "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestalt Feminist Criticism," Elin Diamond describes Brecht's theory of the 'not-but' as "keeping differences in view instead of conforming to stable representations of identity, and linking those differences to a practical politics." One of Brecht's most lucid descriptions of the theory and its application in practice occurs in his 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Estrangement Effect':

When reading his part the actor's attitude should be one of a man who is astounded and contradicts. Not only the occurrence of the incidents, as he reads about them, but the conduct of the man he is playing, as he experiences it, must be weighed up by him and their peculiarities understood; none can be taken as given, ... When he appears on the stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants. He will say for instance 'You'll pay for that', and not say 'I forgive you...' Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested."

Diamond argues that the application of the 'not-but' to characterization is a translation into practice of the Derridean deconstruction of identity. This is because the 'not-but' interrupts the assumed wholeness and a priori givenness of identity by supplying the trace of repressed choices and actions. The fixed monolithic unitary self or any hegemonic mode of being -- like gendered identity -- is transformed into a contradictory and multiple subject-in-process. The target of the estranging eye is not only fixed concepts but the discursive representations through which they are perpetuated. For example, 'not-but' acting 'unveils' the absences of the Stanislavskian system, the way it manufactures an image of coherent identity through a teleological
flow of actions, which erase discontinuous contradictions. The ‘not-but’s’ celebration of difference is crucial to a politics of change and human agency, for as Brecht puts it in “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” it encourages the spect/actor to learn to look with estranging eyes, to view the familiar as if it were a “rough sketching which indicates traces of other movements and features all around the fully-worked-out figure.” This act of complex seeing both transforms perceptions and shows the human subject and its world as capable of manipulation.

In practice at the Berliner Ensemble the ‘not-but’ was often achieved through the following three practices: (1) presentation of contradictory compartments through montage and tableaux; (2) splitting of the socially critical actor from the character and (3) various forms of cross-casting (cross type, generation and gender). All of these methods disrupt the performance convention of iconicity, a ‘fixture’ which, by merging the character with the actor who lives in the present-time on the stage, suppresses the historical nature and multiplicity of actor and character alike in favour of a policy of eternal sameness. When I first began to observe these ‘not-but’ practices in the model books and the rehearsal notes held in the Brecht-Archiv, I thought I might find a realization of the palimpsestic sketching that Brecht describes. Instead I was struck by the concealment of traces into a carefully choreographed and legible grid of socially significant oppositions. There was something closed about the performed structure of opposition, as if the promise of offering up multiple options had been replaced by a presentation of ‘the’ alternative, the ‘socially efficacious’ way of behaving, the ‘better’ social solution. I’ll try and explain what I mean by drawing on two examples of ‘not-but’ practices that occurred in the Berliner Ensemble productions of Mother Courage and her Children.

Contradictory Compartments: In the Mother Courage productions the ‘not-but’ often took the form of contradictory compartments. I am thinking of the disjuncture between Courage’s damming of the war in scene 6 after her daughter has been attacked and disfigured while out collecting canteen supplies, abruptly followed by Courage’s song of praise to war and celebratory march-like striding beside a richly stocked canteen wagon in scene 7; or of the juxtaposition in the tableau of scene 5 which contrasts the figure of Courage diving into the wagon with her war booty—a stolen coat, and Katrin holding her war booty aloft—a child rescued from a war-torn farmhouse.5

Actor/Character Split: The not-but strategy was also realized through the split between critical actor and character that occurred during Weigel’s presentation of the lullaby Courage sings over Katrin’s dead body. In keeping with Brecht’s warning that the lullaby was to be regarded not sentimentally but as based on a murderous outlook, Weigel used the song as a vehicle to criticize the narrow mindedness, the concern for one’s own family regardless of the cost to society at large behind Courage’s profit-seeking involvement in the war. One trick Weigel employed to bring out Courage’s selfishness was the light emphasizing of the word ‘you’ in lines such as “Neighbour’s babes walk in rags/And you wear silk cut from an angel’s skirt,” or “Neighbours don’t have a crumb/And you have a cake.” Brecht argued that this repeated emphasis helped to defamiliarize Courage’s ‘treacherous hope’ that she could bring ‘her’ child and perhaps only ‘her’ child, safely through the war. In the 1960 film version, Weigel further defamiliarized Courage by playing her as blindly obtuse, with her lower lip pushed out in a stubborn expression, bending over Katrin on several occasions to check whether she was breathing. Weigel’s portrayal underlined what Brecht described in his model book notes as her shock that the person she was depicting did not have the ability to learn.6

The various ‘not-but’ techniques applied in Mother Courage that I have glossed all reinforce the conflict between Courage’s activities as a businesswoman trading off war, or big business by other means, and as a mother trying to defend her children and self from the very war she perpetuates. Brecht and Weigel’s staging of the fable indicates how they limited the character’s options by repeatedly pointing to an ideal behaviour — in this case the communist nurturing displayed by Katrin, a socially productive attitude that better lends itself to the creation of a less antagonistically contradictory environment. Both character and spectator are encouraged to view capitalism with estranging eyes and see that Courage’s petit-bourgeois perpetuation of capitalist warfare and individualist ethics is a self-
defeating activity. In Brecht’s historical practice of theatre, the disrupted individualist attitudes are replaced by the fixed communitarian notions of a Marxian framework. Of course, as at any theatre performance, the spectator may not engage in complex seeing and read the ‘not-but’, inserting their own variants instead. Indeed in the case of the character Mother Courage, Brecht was often frustrated by the spectator’s inability to read the social significance of the ‘not-but’ contradictions. But my point here is not so much whether Brecht succeeded in limiting spectatorial interpretations so much as the extent to which the practitioners left the palimpsestic sketchings behind in their attempt to define the choices available to actor, character and spectator alike. 

**Master of Meaning:** What I am arguing here — and my point has been made by commentators such as Roland Barthes and Heiner Müller, is that I find the disruptive potential of the ‘not-but’ sketchings to be curtailed by Brecht’s structuring of oppositions in a way that asserts an ideal meaning through clarifying pictures. Through these pictures, Brecht hierarchically elevates the actor, director and spectator over the character as ‘masters of socialist meaning,’ suppressing other pictures in the process. I am aware that this argument has been challenged by Elin Diamond who counters the notion of a ‘master of meaning’ by arguing that in the Brechtian actor-character-spectator triad, the actor is not endowed with superiority for s/he is also fragmented, split into performing subject and critical demonstrator. Diamond asserts that while the demonstrator is “presumed to have superior knowledge in relation to an ignorant character from the past,” the subject “herself remains as divided and uncertain as the spectators to whom the play is addressed.” Here Diamond is referring to the way the subject is divided into the roles of actor and character, both of which she states will remain “historical, processual and incomplete,” rather than simply disappearing behind one or the other. However, I would argue that in both theory and practice, Brecht’s triad tended to assert the demonstrator as the figure of authority, observing and testing the character and ‘fixing’ the ‘not-but.’

On the theoretical side, this positioning is manifest in the way Brecht emphasizes the importance of the actor’s responsibility to society, insisting that s/he “master our period’s knowledge of human social life by joining in the war of the classes.” The actor’s social responsibility is embodied in the moment when the actor supplements the empathetic approach to the character with the *Haltung* of social criticism. It was Brecht’s hope that the spectator would identify with the actor and apply her critical *Haltung* to life. In addition, Brecht has little to say about the subject’s display of those aspects of self which contradict or are different from those of the socialist ‘master of meaning.’

The discussion of empathy recorded by Brecht during the 1953 *Katzgraben* rehearsals exemplifies this point at the ‘practical’ level. During the discussion Helene Weigel explained that when playing Courage in the final scene, particularly on the line “I must get back into business,” her empathetic relationship with the character would be disrupted in part by her shock at Courage’s inability to learn. In this case Weigel’s response as an historical subject neatly corresponds with that of a socialist commentator. At no other point in the discussion are subject positions incompatible with a socialist outlook raised.

**PART TWO:**

**Hierarchical Opposites:** Brecht’s assertion of the opposition between the demonstrator and demonstrated character brings me to the second strategy of unfixing within Brecht’s theatre that I wish briefly to discuss: dialectical interplay. Particularly towards the end of his career, Brecht became increasingly aware of his interest in working with inclusive oppositions. Even before this period he had established a theatre that engaged with oppositions: demonstrator/demonstrated character; observing/doing; teaching/learning; instructing/entertaining; literal mimesis/non-literal mimesis; diachronic fable/synchronous tableau and so on. This interest in opposition can be related to his dialectical conception of change as dependent on friction and to his notion of the inter-dependence and interconnection of all things.

During his time at the Berliner Ensemble Brecht increased his theoretical musings on dialectics as well as working in practice on the dialectic between demonstration and empathy. At a theoreti-
cal level this work on dialectical theatre is expressed in the following statement from the 1954 "Appendices to the "Short Organum."

"The contradiction between acting (demonstration) and experience (empathy) is interpreted by the ignorant as if only one or the other appeared in the actor's work (as if the "Short Organum" concentrated entirely on acting and the old tradition entirely on experience). In reality it is naturally a matter of two mutually antagonistic processes which unite themselves in the actor's work; ... Out of the struggle and tension between the two opposites ... the actor draws his real strength. The style in which the "Short Organum" is written is partly to blame for this. It is misleading often thanks to a possibly over-impatient and over-exclusive concern with the 'principal side of the contradiction.'"\(^{10}\)

In a footnote, Brecht cites Mao T'se-tung's article "On Contradiction" as the source of his statement about the 'principal side of the contradiction.' Mao cautions that while the 'principal side' is the major determinant, as in the example of the opposition between economic foundation and superstructure, Mao cautions that the dominant position is not to be regarded as a fixed state, for the principal and subordinate aspects of a contradiction "transform themselves into each other," often leading to a reversal in status.\(^{11}\)

The year before this appendix was written, Brecht had been busy during rehearsals of Katzgraben working on the dialectical of demonstration and empathy in practice. For example, he told his actor Erwin Geschonneck to empathize more with the character he was playing, the wealthy farmer Großmann whose attitude provides the major obstacle to agricultural reform within the Katzgraben community. Apparently the actor had been giving only the criticism of the character and not the character itself. By exposing Großmann to constant ridicule, Geschonneck actually undermined the farmer's credibility as a threatening opponent in the class struggle. Brecht suggested that Geschonneck work on subjectively justifying his character by regarding him as an intelligent man and crafty negotiator who is only overturned by the new situation.\(^{12}\)

The usefulness of the dialectical interplay between opposites as an 'unfixing' strategy is that it avoids the problems of exclusive separate entities. However, what I find problematical in Brecht's dialectics is his hierarchical approach to oppositions, an approach expressed through the elevation of a 'principal side.' Deconstructionists and French feminists alike have alerted attention to the way hierarchical opposites such as masculine/feminine, elevate one of the terms while conceiving the second in relation to it as a negation, manifestation or disruption of the first. How such oppositions can be disrupted remains a vexed issue. Derrida posits a reversal of the prioritization which brings about change in the nature of both terms, displacing or resituating the original opposition. Brecht often performs such reversals — the demonstration/empathy dialectic which reverses the Stanislavskian or dramatic theatre's focus on empathy is a case in point. As Elizabeth Grosz states in her examination of the mind/body opposition, the more fundamental issue is whether we can ever stand outside oppositions 'for even the idea of going beyond dichotomies creates and relies on a dichotomy,' that between dichotomous and non-dichotomous thought.\(^{13}\) In the case of Brecht's prioritization's, maybe it is a matter of being aware of the oppositions with which he works and considering whether his binaries cause any marginalizations that are relevant to contemporary social existence.

As an example of how that awareness might operate I will briefly look at a further ramification of the 'master of meaning,' that being the demonstrator's analytical control over not simply the character but the character's objectified body. The act of control seems interconnected with another hierarchical binary of concern to feminist theorists today, that being the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. This opposition has been associated with patriarchal traditions of thought which align males with the operation of mind and females with a body, conceived as a brute givenness in need of transcendence. On the one hand, Brecht's gestus-centred theatre reverses the two terms through the reassertion of the body and insistence on dialectical interplay. Brecht explicitly condemns the idealist Cartesian model in a c. 1945 Messingkauf dialogue about bourgeois theatre's emphasis on facial expression [Mimik] and psychologizing in which the face is treated as the mirror and the body simply as a container for the soul. He notes at the same time the bourgeois theatre's con-
comitant neglect of gesticulation [Gestik], which Brecht associates with social customs and habits. In his theatre, by contrast, Gestik prevails over Mimik for the face is written on by the gestus of the body.\textsuperscript{14} In this reversal the terms are redefined. Facial expression is no longer the mirror of a disconnected soul but one of the body’s many surfaces moulded by material relations, mental activities and social discourses. Through the portrayal of the mapping of ideology across the body, gestic acting also makes an important contribution to the politics of embodiment in its assertion that the body is ‘not’ essentially brute animality ‘but’ an ever changeable historical phenomenon.

On the other hand, the character’s body is an object controlled by the rational demonstrator, bound to the Apollonian techniques of blocking arrangements, tableau and what Brecht called auf-den-Punkt sprechen. “Speaking to the point” involved isolating one sentence-gesture from the next by paying careful attention to the punctuation mark given at the end of each sentence, to accentuation, the clarity of consonants, and only speaking when at a standstill.

Moreover, this body was often locked into the economically determined rituals and social functions of everyday mundanity. At the Ensemble rehearsals the actor was trained to defamiliarize historical comportments invariably marked by signs of political repression — rather than develop subversive and/or celebratory forms of corporeality such as nakedness, pleasurable or painful convulsion, abstract dance and acrobatic extension in space and time. In addition the performing subject’s body was somewhat concealed under the body of the critical demonstrator. Brecht frequently described the demonstrator in macho terms as a cool engineer or chauffeur, puffing away at the ubiquitous cigar, and free from the oozing excesses of temperament — such as the trickle of sweat and hot surging of blood through over-worked arteries which he associated with dramatic theatre. In all these instances the mind/body binary reasserts itself with the bodies on stage remaining subordinate to reason and socially significant meaning.

By observing acting strategies such as the ‘not-but’ and dialectical interplay, I hope to have suggested Brecht’s talent for unfixed fixity by displacing unitary identity and binary oppositions, as well as his reinscribing of fixity through the Enlightenment ‘master of meaning.’ In my discussion of Brecht’s assault on the fixed, I am in partial agreement with Marc Silberman who describes Brecht’s interest in the way facts are not ‘given’ but produced by representation, as postmodern in its “antimetaphysical insistence that the truth cannot be uncovered, revealed or exposed behind the surface appearance but, rather, that the process of concealment itself is the structure of truth.”\textsuperscript{15} Yes, Brecht is fascinated by the idea of the construction of the subject and of representation. Yet his epistemological outlook seems to me more contradictory and full of metaphysical traces than Silberman would have it. For example, in Brecht’s musings on dialectics he seems to posit a given truth — that being the historical and dialectical flux of social laws as apprehended through Marxist analysis. The metaphysical activities of the gestic actor who ‘makes clear,’ ‘grasps,’ ‘demonstrates,’ ‘reveals’ and ‘shows’ are often directed towards the revelation of that dialectical structure. In addition, Brecht often approached the truth from the point of view of a partisan pragmatist, using practical usefulness of the acceptance or rejection of a judgement as his measuring rod. The combination of Brecht’s displacement of fixed structures with his partisan pragmatism, embodied I would argue in the ‘master of meaning’, remains a fragile but thought provoking model for political theatre of the future.

\textbf{Endnotes}

7 Diamond, \textit{op. cit.}, 87-88.
8 Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” 196
Glaubens und der Tugend die Sünde, das Böse ist, wissen wir wohl; eben darum ist jenes sittliche Befehlswort ‘Widerstehe nicht dem Bösen!’ ein Künstler- und Moralistenwort,—kein politisches Wort, wie sich versteht (Thomas Mann, Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen, 403).

This citation comes not from Brecht but from Thomas Mann, and the sentiment expressed therein seems anti-Brechtian. It would seem from many commonly expressed views that Brecht, in Die Maßnahme, is on the other side of Mann’s dichotomy — no Dialektiker but a dogmatic Politiker. Mann says of the Politiker: “Was die Dialektik betrifft, so hat er selbstverständlich eine Höllenangst vor ihr, und hastig nennt er jeden Einwand gegen die ‘Lehre’ ein Sophisma — ungeachtet man mit demselben Recht jeden seiner eigenen Heilsätze sophistisch nennen könnte” (403). This definition of politics serves well for an examination of the tension between Dialektiker and Politiker, or as Brecht calls them, Klassiker, in his notes on philosophy and in Die Maßnahme, the dramatic product of these reflections. In the course of this examination, I seek to clarify some of the points around which recent scholarship on Die Maßnahme gravitates. My theses are as follow: First, Brecht’s own critique of ideology as philosophy accounts just as well for what happens in Die Maßnahme as frequently invoked outside models do, from Jesus Christ to Carl Schmitt. Second, whereas recent Brecht scholarship tends to emphasize the critical power of the internal framing structures of the play — the representation by four actors of scenes involving a fifth, absent person before a Party tribunal — and the play’s theatrical setting, Brecht thematizes these critical issues in the text of the play as well as in these frames and in its relation to the ideally detached Brechtian spectator. Third, the question remaining is not so much whether the play’s critical value comes from its form or its content, but whether its reception on the terms I shall outline is really an efficacious step toward the realization of a revolutionary agenda or only an innovative recasting of the tradition of philosophical critique.

Klassiker and Dialektiker: The value of “the political” is defined in this context as constitutive of an ideology or a dogma based on authority. Brecht