Preface

The publication of this collection of essays marks the centenary of Brecht’s birth on 10 February 1898. It appears ten years after the publication of the initial volumes in the new Brecht edition, the *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe,* and is the first major collection of essays on Brecht to take full account of that new edition. The essays were commissioned from scholars and critics around the world, and cover six main areas: biographical controversies; neglected theoretical writings; the semiotics of Brechtian theatre; new readings of classic texts; Brecht and the GDR; and contemporary appropriations of Brecht’s work.

In the wake of German unification and the collapse of Stalinist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, it has often been suggested that the writings of a committed Marxist such as Brecht are of no relevance to our post-historical, post-modern age. In Brecht’s case, moreover, political hostility has been buttressed by excoriating attacks on his personal and professional credentials, notably in John Fuegi’s *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht.* Although many of Fuegi’s more lurid and grossly inaccurate accusations have been given short shrift by Brecht scholarship, the issues which Fuegi raises concerning collaboration or exploitation of Brecht’s female co-workers cannot be ignored. The essays by Kuhn and Preece confront precisely these issues from the perspectives of biography, memoir, and fictionalised accounts of Brecht’s dealings with others. As Kuhn indicates, such apparently straightforward matters in fact raise a host of theoretical questions concerning authorship and textuality. The essays by Giles and Livingstone focus therefore on neglected theoretical writings, while Ujma considers his relationship with Ernst Bloch, but all three essays question the nature of Brecht’s Marxism and his understanding of modernity. This is a central theme in Giles’ commentary on *Der Dreigroschenprozeß,* Brecht’s most sustained and sophisticated theoretical essay. The dialogical and dialectical aspect of Brecht’s writing, underlined by Livingstone in his discussion of *Me*-ti, is also crucial in Vaßen’s analysis of Brecht’s city poetry, as is its reception by Walter Benjamin.

The five essays at the heart of the collection deal with Brechtian theatre. White and Rokem focus their attention on the sign systems and spatial configurations that are characteristic of epic theatre, whilst Roche rethinks
Brecht’s relationship to the European comic tradition. Moss and Holmes both concentrate on Leben des Galilei, taking up the thematics of decentring addressed by Rokem, but also reviewing the play’s contemporary relevance in the light of recent critical debates on the viability of Enlightenment reason and Marxist politics.

Brecht’s uneasy relationship with GDR writers and cultural politics is explored in the next three essays. Thomaneck compares Brecht and Anna Seghers’ very different conceptions of law and justice in the context of socialist reconstruction after 1945, whilst Davies and Parker analyse the contradictory nature of Brecht’s relationship with the cultural and political hierarchies of the GDR. The question of Brecht’s standing and reception in the GDR after his death in 1956 plays an important role in Rechtien’s discussion of his impact on Christa Wolf’s work in the 1960s and 1980s, as does his understanding of science and socialism.

Like Brecht, Christa Wolf has been the subject of vitriolic attacks in recent years during the debates provoked by the publication in 1990 of Was bleibt. The theoretical dimension of those debates provides the framework for Herhoffer’s reconsideration of Brecht’s Lehrstücke in terms of the controversial concept of Gesinnungsästhetik. Herhoffer shows that even these texts, commonly taken to be the most didactic of Brecht’s works, retain a flexibility and dynamic openness which transcend the narrow confines of their ostensible politics, and it is the dialectical and deconstructive tenor of Brecht’s plays which, as Weber demonstrates, has been of particular interest to contemporary American playwrights. Mumford, finally, discusses the most radical of recent critiques and appropriations of Brecht in her exploration of materialist feminists’ engagement with gestic acting, Marxism and gender, and performance theory.

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1 Bertolt Brecht, Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, Hg. W. Hecht, J. Knopf, W. Mittenzwei, K-D. Müller (Berlin, Aufbau/ Frankfurt aM, Suhrkamp, 1988- ), cited throughout this collection in the abbreviated form BFA, followed by the relevant volume and page numbers.
