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Building New Audiences at the Berliner Ensemble, 1949-1956

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‘Wir setzen in die Logen Arbeiter.’¹ (Brecht)

When Berlin’s theatres re-opened in 1945, most of the city’s theatre practitioners and spectators had not heard of the plays that are now widely regarded as Brecht’s greatest: *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, *Das Leben des Galilei*, *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, and *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*. Brecht’s works had been banned for the previous twelve years, and the German texts of his exile plays had not yet been published in readily available editions. For the most part, Brecht’s name was familiar only to those old enough to remember him from the Weimar Republic, or who had been in exile from Nazi Germany, or – as a journalist wrote in *Neues Deutschland* in 1948 – had secretly held onto recordings of his songs during the ‘Jahre der Isolierung’ inside the Third Reich.² So when Brecht came to East Berlin in October 1948 and went on to found the Berliner Ensemble, he had to begin the process of re-introducing himself to post-war German audiences. What has not been appreciated before is just how intense the Berliner Ensemble’s work to mobilize audiences was in its early years, or the nature and extent of its outreach activities. Brecht had stated the need for this work in his initial two-page concept for the Berliner Ensemble, and in 1951 he and his collaborators documented some of the theatre’s outreach activities in their flagship publication *Theaterarbeit*,

¹ Bertolt Brecht and others, “‘Da sind überall Schwierigkeiten’”: Greifswalder Studenten diskutieren mit Brecht. Ein Gespräch im Berliner Ensemble am 28. März 1954’, p. 17, Berliner Ensemble Archive (BEA) pink lever arch file ‘Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre’.

² Melis, ‘Die Dreigroschenoper im Film’, *Neues Deutschland* (East Berlin), 27 June 1948.

presenting them as a vital part of the company's practice.³ However, theatre scholars have focused instead on Brecht's stagings, their reception by critics and cultural politicians, and his attempts to defend his practice against the criticisms of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED).⁴ An important dimension of the Berliner Ensemble's work has thus far been overlooked.

The Berliner Ensemble's drive to attract an audience was about more than just selling tickets for Brecht's plays. Brecht and his collaborators were seeking to transform the composition of their audience by attracting working-class spectators to a leading professional theatre; the epigraph to this article shows Brecht's ambition of putting working-class spectators in the best seats in the house, the boxes traditionally reserved for upper-class patrons. These efforts built on the contacts that Brecht had established with working-class organizations and the Marxistische Arbeiterschule in the Weimar Republic, and with Danish amateur theatre practitioners in exile. They also had a crucial precursor in the Volksbühne, the organization founded in 1890 to make professional theatre accessible to a mass audience, and which had acquired half a million members across Germany by 1930, before it was subsumed under the Deutsche Bühne in the Third Reich.⁵ In the GDR, Brecht's ambition of attracting a working-class audience to the Berliner Ensemble coincided with government policy: the SED had set the re-founded Deutsche Volksbühne the target of doubling its membership to a million spectators and increasing the proportion of workers from 30% of its membership to 60%.⁶ In *Theaterarbeit*, the Berliner Ensemble suggested that the scale of the task was even more formidable than the official statistics suggested: whilst the Berlin Volksbühne's official statistics showed in March 1951 that blue-collar workers (*Betriebsarbeiter*) accounted for 31% of audiences, a straw poll after one performance at the Berliner Ensemble indicated that they made up only 3% of the audience.⁷ This article explores how Brecht's rhetoric was backed up by very substantial practical activity, conducted primarily by his young collaborators.

³ Bertolt Brecht, 'Theaterprojekt B.', Landesarchiv Berlin, C Rep. 120, 1504, quoted in Werner Hecht, *Brecht und die DDR: Die Mühen der Ebenen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2013), pp. 20-21 (p. 21); Ruth Berlau and others, eds, *Theaterarbeit: 6 Aufführungen des Berliner Ensembles*, 3rd rev. edn (East Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1966), pp. 401-04 and pp. 410-12.

⁴ See e.g. David Barnett, *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theater: The Brechtian Legacy* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000); Hecht, *Brecht und die DDR*.

⁵ Cecil W. Davies, *Theatre for the People: The Story of the Volksbühne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 113 and p. 115.

⁶ [Anon.], 'Arbeitsprogramm des FDGB zur Entfaltung der kult. Massenarbeit', p. 15, Bundesarchiv (BArch) DY 34/23540.

⁷ [Anon.], 'Über die Organisation unserer Betriebsarbeit', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 411.

Early experiments with outreach

The immediate origins of the Berliner Ensemble's outreach work lay in 1948, several months before Brecht's return to Berlin, and over a year before the company was founded. Three actors, Bruno Lorenz, Egon Monk, and Isot Kilian, developed a programme of songs and poems called 'Eine Stunde mit Bertolt Brecht', accompanied by the pianist Fritz Hemmann. Lorenz and Hemmann were familiar with Brecht's work from the Weimar Republic, when Lorenz had belonged to the agitprop troupe *Das rote Sprachrohr*,⁸ but Kilian and Monk were only just becoming acquainted with it. When Monk saw a production of Brecht's *Furcht und Elend des dritten Reiches* at the Deutsches Theater, the songs – including 'O Deutschland, bleiche Mutter' – that Käte Kuhl sang between the scenes made by far the strongest impression on him.⁹ Monk and his colleagues found further exile poems by Brecht in an anthology called *Das Wort der Verfolgten*, and performed them alongside pre-war poems from *Die Hauspostille* and songs from *Die Dreigroschenoper* – the latter being the only ones for which they had the music.¹⁰ Monk added information about Brecht's biography, gleaned from the little that he had been able to read in the press.¹¹ The group, which was affiliated to the Deutsche Volksbühne, performed in workplaces, pubs, and factory canteens, as well as a school hall in Pankow and a dance hall in Lichterfelde, in the American zone.¹²

In February 1949, the SED newspaper *Neues Deutschland* carried a report of a performance by the group in a factory near what is now the Ostbahnhof:

Schlesischer Bahnhof — Andreasstraße — Firma Pintsch zweiter, dritter, vierter Stock. Eine kleine Tür gibt den Blick frei in einen großen, nüchternen Saal. Auf Holzbänken Frauen und Männer auf einer improvisierten Bühne. Scheinwerferlicht fällt auf ein junges Mädchen im Straßenkleid, das wie

⁸ Ditte von Arnim, *Brechts letzte Liebe: Das Leben der Isot Kilian* (Berlin: Transit, 2006), p. 67 and p. 69.

⁹ Egon Monk, 'Seit ich im "Deutschen Theater" "Furcht und Elend des dritten Reiches" gesehen hatte...', Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste (AdK), Egon-Monk-Archiv (EMA) 2115.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Gersch, Egon Monk, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and Peter Voigt, 'Der Abend des Films: Erinnerungen an das frühe Berliner Ensemble, 9.2.1998', EMA 638.

¹¹ Monk, 'Seit ich im "Deutschen Theater"', EMA 2115.

¹² von Arnim, p. 70. *Volk und Kunst* reported in 1949 that the Volksbühne was supporting a similar touring initiative in Mecklenburg: a group of young artists had performed a cabaret programme called 'Aufwärts die Kurve' in factories in thirty-six locations in recent months. The programme did not focus on Brecht. See P. Schwarze, 'Die Kulturarbeit der Volksbühne in den Betrieben', *Volk und Kunst*, 1.2 (March/April 1949), 20-21 (p. 20).

selbstverständlich dort oben steht und den Song der Seeräuber-Jenny aus der *Dreigroschenoper* singt. In den Gesichtern der Arbeiter zuckt es, Ablehnung wechselt mit Erstaunen. Was ist das? Was sind das für Worte? Das ist doch kein Theater, das ist ja Leben, Wirklichkeit!¹³

According to a review of the same performance in the *Berliner Zeitung*, the more recent poems such as 'Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?' were the most topical and impressive.¹⁴ Kilian made contact with Brecht at around this time, approaching both him and Helene Weigel after a public discussion between Brecht and the editor of *Theater der Zeit*, Fritz Erpenbeck, at the Kulturbund. She told Brecht that she and her colleagues wanted to know what he thought of their programme, and he invited them to show it to him the next morning at the Deutsches Theater.¹⁵ Kilian also explained that Monk wanted to find out more about Brecht's biography for the programme, and Monk subsequently went to meet Brecht at his temporary residence at the Hotel Adlon, incorporating anecdotes from the meeting into the programme.¹⁶ Once the Berliner Ensemble had been established, Brecht engaged the group as a marketing troupe. This ability to spot and harness talent was characteristic of Brecht. What he prized, according to Monk, was independence and initiative: rather than micromanaging his assistants and young actors, he put the ensemble and its structures at their disposal.¹⁷

An article in *Neues Deutschland* in December 1949 shows how the group's outreach work developed at the Berliner Ensemble. Twenty-five year-old Kilian, whose parents had both stood on the KPD list in the Reichstag elections of March 1933,¹⁸ told the reporter:

Wir werden [...] in die Betriebe gehen. Es nützt gar nichts, nur davon zu reden, daß die Arbeiter mit dem, was wir wollen, vertraut werden müßten.

¹³ Erich Vogt, 'Eine Stunde mit Bert Brecht', *Neues Deutschland* (East Berlin), 11 February 1949.

¹⁴ z. R., 'Ein Brechtabend bei Pintsch', *Berliner Zeitung*, 10 February 1949.

¹⁵ CD recording of an interview with Isot Kilian, [1979?], Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv (BBA), Isot-Kilian-Archiv (IKA) 1228. The name of the interviewer is not known.

¹⁶ Monk, 'Seit ich im "Deutschen Theater"', EMA 2115.

¹⁷ Egon Monk, 'Wer in Brechts Nähe darauf wartete...', EMA 2115. Monk would go on to train with Brecht as a director, and Kilian worked at the Berliner Ensemble until 1970, first as an actor, then as a dramaturge and director's assistant, and finally as *Produktionsleiterin*. See von Arnim, p. 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Man muß auch selbst etwas dazu tun. Deshalb warten wir nicht, bis die Arbeiter zu uns kommen. Wir gehen zu ihnen.¹⁹

Kilian and eight other young colleagues from the Berliner Ensemble developed a *Werbeprogramm* designed to drum up interest in the theatre's first two productions. They performed songs from *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti*, linked by texts written by Brecht, and a song from Gorky's *Wassa Schelesnowa*. They also told workers about Gorky's life, before performing a clown sketch called *Wie dem deutschen Michel geholfen wird*. Kilian told *Neues Deutschland* that the Berliner Ensemble would circulate lists so that workers who had seen the preview could sign up to attend a Sunday matinee performance of one of the plays the following month. The premiere of the *Werbeprogramm* took place the following day at Kabelwerk Oberspree, a large factory in Oberschöneeweide.²⁰ However, the Berliner Ensemble's internal report states that only twenty of the three hundred people present at the post-show discussion were actually workers. The remaining spectators were functionaries and invited guests.²¹ If the report is accurate – and the figure twenty was not simply a typographical error – then it offers an early indication that performing in factories did not guarantee an audience of workers from the shop floor.

Surviving evidence of the performance at Kabelwerk Oberspree offers insights into how the Berliner Ensemble interacted with its audiences during outreach visits. The combative post-show discussion focused on the clown sketch, which the group had based on the scene with Herr Schmitt in Brecht's play *Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis*. Under the guise of 'helping' Herr Schmitt and easing the pain of which he complains, two clowns saw off three of his limbs, one ear, and half of his head, before unscrewing his head completely.²² In the Berliner Ensemble's version of the scene, Herr Schmitt was now 'der deutsche Michel', and the scene was designed to illustrate the Western Allied Powers' treatment of Germany.²³ A report of the performance in *Theaterarbeit* suggests simply that the workers rejected the sketch – a point that elides the fact that the majority of those present seem to have been functionaries:

Das Clownspiel lehnten die Arbeiter u. a. mit der Begründung ab, daß die Spaltung Deutschlands nicht in einem Clownspiel dargestellt werden sollte.

¹⁹ -be-, 'Der ausgestopfte Herr Puntila: Das "Berliner Ensemble" geht in die Betriebe', *Neues Deutschland* (East Berlin), 11 December 1949.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ [Anon.], 'Bericht über die Diskussion nach unserer Veranstaltung im Kabelwerk Oberspree mit dem Publikum (12. Dezember 1949)', BBA 216/11.

²² Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe (BFA)*, 30 vols, ed. by Werner Hecht and others (Berlin and Frankfurt a.M.: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1988-2000), III (1988), pp. 31-35.

²³ [Anon.], 'Unsere Veranstaltungen in Betrieben', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 402.

Ihre Einwände richteten sich in der Hauptsache gegen die Form. Das lehrte uns, besonders auf leicht verständliche Formen zu achten.²⁴

However, a more detailed report in the Brecht Archive indicates that spectators engaged dialectically with the performance, challenging the provocatively passive behaviour that they had witnessed on stage: 'Es käme so heraus, dass das deutsche Volk am Boden liegt, ohne sich zu w[e]hren. Es sind aber auch andere Kräfte im Volk, die nicht wie Michel mit der gezeigten Art Hilfe einverstanden sind.'²⁵ Members of the audience suggested how the sketch should be changed: Michel should resist when his limbs are amputated; the performance should include the FDJ 'Zukunftslied', and it should show how Michel's limbs grow again during the SED's Two Year Plan. Spectators even suggested that voices from offstage should warn Michel against his behaviour, and that the speakers should come on stage at the end, tell Michel that he must not act like this, pick him up, and help him to act progressively. These suggestions served to embed the spectators' objections in the performance, turning it back into a piece of straightforwardly didactic theatre: a sketch that told spectators what to think, rather than provoking them into thinking for themselves. Some of those present saw this as problematic: 'Es gab eine Diskussion darüber, ob man nun alles klar servieren sollte oder etwas zum Denken offen lassen soll.'²⁶ Two workers defended the marketing troupe's approach, using culinary metaphors that would surely have appealed to Brecht. One commented: 'Wenn der Mensch eine Torte isst, muss er sie auch verdauen, also [darf man] ihm nicht schon alles vorgekaut servieren.'²⁷ Another explained: 'Wir haben hier bisher nur Mehlsuppe bekommen und das Spiel, was wir heute gesehen haben, besteht im Verhältnis dazu aus Knödeln, daran müssen wir uns erst gewöhnen.'²⁸

By 26 April 1950, the marketing troupe had staged thirty-six outreach events for eight to nine thousand people in locations including a hospital in Wuhlgarten, a chemical factory in Grünau, the steel works in Hennigsdorf, and the Landestagung of the SED in Neuruppin.²⁹ By the end of the 1951 season, according to *Theaterarbeit*, the Berliner Ensemble had staged ninety-three outreach events in front of thirty-two thousand workers.³⁰ In some weeks the BE had several such commitments in addition to its in-house performances. It adopted an inclusive approach, targeting not just factories and trade unions, but the consumer cooperative store Konsum on Stresemannstraße, the department store HO-Stalinallee, and a Christmas party for old-age pensioners in

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ 'Bericht über die Diskussion', BBA 216/11.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ [Anon.], 'Die Arbeit der Betriebs-Werbegruppe des Berliner Ensemble', pp. 1-5, BEA green lever arch file 'Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre'.

³⁰ [Anon.], 'Betriebsarbeit', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 401.

Charlottenburg, in the British sector.³¹ The Berliner Ensemble also staged events at institutions that were ideological carriers of the regime, such as the editorial office of *Neues Deutschland*, or that were part of the security apparatus, such as the Polizei-Inspektion in Lichtenberg, the Deutsche Grenzpolizei, and a prison for juvenile offenders in Köpenick, run by Kilian's mother.³² Looking back on the early 1950s, Werner Thalheim – the former head of marketing at the Komische Oper – wrote in *Theater der Zeit* 'daß sich die Theater lediglich um die Durchführung der abendlichen Vorstellungen bemühten, wahren [sic] die Füllung ihrer Häuser und die Arbeit mit dem Besucher in erster Linie die Aufgabe der Volksbühnen-Organisation war'.³³ This was not a charge that could have been levelled at the Berliner Ensemble.

Organizing theatre attendance through the workplace

In the Weimar Republic, Brecht had been highly critical of the Volksbühne. In 1926, he argued that it had simply perpetuated 'den alten, überholten Theaterbetrieb' and was now 'nichts weiter als ein nichtsnutziger Verschleiß von Theaterkarten an ihre Mitglieder'.³⁴ His view had not changed substantially by 1949. After a meeting with the mayor of East Berlin, Friedrich Ebert; the artistic director of the Deutsches Theater, Wolfgang Langhoff; and the artistic director of the Volksbühne theatre, Fritz Wisten, Brecht wrote:

Auch von Sparmaßnahmen wurde geredet und von der Notwendigkeit, der Volksbühne eine Bleibe zu schaffen, bis das alte Haus renoviert sei. (Man hat dieses sozialdemokratische Kleinbürgerunternehmen 'jedem kleinen Mann eine ständige Theaterloge' neu aufgezogen und liefert Schmierenaufführungen.) Zum ersten Mal fühle ich den stinkenden Atem der Provinz hier.³⁵

In an article first published in the Deutsche Volksbühne's magazine *Volk und Kunst*, Brecht set out his view on the future strategy of the network, advocating block theatre bookings linked to the workplace:

Geht ein Betrieb ins Theater, oder Volkspolizei, oder Lehrerschaft, gibt es große Möglichkeiten der Diskussion zwischen den Besuchern und dem

³¹ Ibid.; Rohde, 'Arbeitsbericht d. Werbebüros für Februar 1956', BBA 1115/79-87 (p. 79); 'Die Arbeit der Betriebs-Werbegruppe', p. 4.

³² Ibid., p. 3, p. 4, and p. 5; Rohde, BBA 1115/82; interview with Isot Kilian, IKA 1228.

³³ Werner Thalheim, 'Stillstand bedeutet Rückschritt: Diskussionsbeitrag zu einigen Fragen des Theaterbesuchs', *Theater der Zeit*, 10.1 (January 1955), 41-43 (p. 41).

³⁴ Bertolt Brecht, '[Die Volksbühnenbewegung und die junge Generation]', in *BFA*, XXI.I (1992), 138.

³⁵ Bertolt Brecht, journal entry for 6 January 1949, in *BFA*, xxvii (1995), 296.

Theater. Ein nach Arbeitsstätten einheitlich zusammengesetztes Publikum kann ganz anders Einfluß nehmen auf ein Theater, ein Theater ganz anders Einfluß nehmen auf ein so gebildetes Publikum.³⁶

Theaterarbeit offered a glimpse of how this might ideally work: *Held der Arbeit* Hans Garbe talked about the conversations that he had had with his colleagues about Brecht's production of *Die Mutter*:

Einer aus meinem Betrieb hat das Stück gesehen. Der kam zu mir und sagte: 'Mensch Hans, das war doch ganz großartig, das ist doch dasselbe, was du immer sagst.' Ich sagte zu ihm: 'Na siehst du, es hätte viel mehr geschehen können in unserer Heimat.'

Zu meinem Kollegen Schmidt, einem Schmiedemeister, der acht Kinder hat, habe ich gesagt: 'Wenn du dir das Stück ansiehst, dann verstehst du, warum du deine Schmiede losgeworden bist.'³⁷

The Berliner Ensemble took practical steps to encourage workplace bookings, asking the Deutsche Volksbühne to hand over 30% of the tickets for the theatre's productions, starting with *Die Mutter*.³⁸ Members of the Berliner Ensemble then distributed the tickets in factories at the Volksbühne's reduced price of DM 3 per ticket, using the opportunity to talk to workers and functionaries about the plays, give advice about amateur theatre, and speak over the tannoy. On 31 March 1951, the Berliner Ensemble informed the Deutsche Volksbühne that since January it had sold two thousand tickets directly to workers in twenty-seven factories, including Siemens-Plania, Bergmann-Borsig, Kabelwerk Oberspree, and the Transformatorenwerk Oberschöneweide, all at the Volksbühne's price.³⁹ However, in a letter to Helene Weigel, the Central Secretary of the Deutsche Volksbühne expressed concern that attempts to sell tickets to individual workers in this way removed the incentive for workers to join the Deutsche Volksbühne, thus inadvertently undermining its efforts.⁴⁰

Although the Berliner Ensemble was a frequent target of the SED's criticisms in the 1950s, it was very much in the vanguard of efforts to reach working-class audiences. In July 1950, it took its production of *Herr Puntila* on tour to audiences in Weimar, Gera,

³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, 'Über die Organisationsfrage', *BFA*, xxiii (1993), 126. First published in *Volk und Kunst*, 2.6/7 (June 1950), 7-9 (p. 7).

³⁷ 'Hans Garbe über die Aufführung', in *Theaterarbeit*, pp. 168-70 (p. 170).

³⁸ 'Über die Organisation unserer Betriebsarbeit', *Theaterarbeit*, p. 411.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Copy of a letter from Walter Maschke to Helene Weigel, 12 March 1951, BArch DY 30/IV 2/9.06/194.

Plauen, Chemnitz, and Binz.⁴¹ The tour to Weimar was extended with performances of *Wassa Schelesnowa* and *Der Hofmeister* into a *Woche der Betriebe*, organized with the support of the Deutsche Volksbühne and Hans Robert Bortfeldt and Walter Jupé from the Nationaltheater Weimar.⁴² In *Theaterarbeit*, the Berliner Ensemble awarded Helene Weigel the credit for suggesting that this practice of showing the GDR's best productions to factory workers should become a regular occurrence.⁴³ Whilst it has not been possible to corroborate this claim, the Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB) did launch the *Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften* in 1951: the festival took place twice a year, and it was designed to provide two hundred thousand spectators with access to theatre, in nine cities of the GDR.⁴⁴ As Annette Schuhmann points out, the purpose of dedicated trade union performances was to allow workers to see that they formed the majority of the audience. She quotes from the programme for the *III. Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften* in 1952:

Schau Dich um im Publikum, und Du wirst finden, daß es Deine Arbeitskollegen und –kolleginnen sind, die mit Dir gemeinsam die Kunst des Theaters erleben. Da sitzt nicht mehr der Spießbürger im Bratenrock; da sitzt nicht mehr die dicke Frau Geheimrätin; sondern da sitzen im Feiertagskleid Dein Kollege vom Schraubstock, Deine Kollegin aus der Weberei, die Leute von der MAS-Station, Aktivisten, fortschrittliche Menschen aus den Berufen der Technik, Kunst und Wissenschaft und andere Dir Wohlbekannte aus den Schwerpunkten der Produktion.⁴⁵

The Berliner Ensemble participated in the *I. Theaterwochen* by showing its production of *Die Mutter* in Dresden, Chemnitz, and Weimar; on average, 60% of the audience was made up of blue-collar workers, 25% of agricultural workers, and the remaining 15% by white-collar workers and intellectuals.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Berliner Ensemble, 'Logbuch 1949-1951', pp. 108-17, BBA 'BE-Unterlagen 249'. The performances in Binz were for workers from the mining company Wismut AG who were on holiday on the island of Rügen; see 'Das Logbuch des Berliner Ensembles' [June 1949-July 1950], p. 6, IKA 536-636.

⁴² Ibid.; [anon.], 'Betriebstheaterwochen', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 403.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Annette Schuhmann, *Kulturarbeit im sozialistischen Betrieb: Gewerkschaftliche Erziehungspraxis in der SBZ/DDR 1946 bis 1970* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), p. 225.

⁴⁵ Abteilung Kulturelle Massenarbeit, FDGB, and Zentraleitung der Deutschen Volksbühne, *III. Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften* (East Berlin: Tribüne, 1952), p. 8. Quoted in Schuhmann, pp. 226-27. Schuhmann's quotation contains an error that has been amended here, after checking with the original source.

⁴⁶ [Anon.], 'Einige Erfahrungen', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 403.

Theaterarbeit reveals the lengths to which the Berliner Ensemble went to prepare these trade union audiences for its productions, at a time when the organizers of the *Theaterwochen* argued that the festival's greatest flaw was the general lack of introductory events and materials.⁴⁷ The company's dramaturges made suggestions for radio programmes to regional broadcasters in Dresden and Weimar, and to the local studio in Chemnitz. In preparation for *Die Mutter*, for example, the Berliner Ensemble provided broadcasters with a short factual introduction to the play, a recording of the 'Bericht vom 1. Mai' from scene 5, and Brecht's verse 'Als ich das Stück "Die Mutter" schrieb', taken from his longer poem 'Brief an das Arbeitertheater "Theatre Union", das Stück "Die Mutter" betreffend'. *Theaterarbeit* suggests that nothing was left to chance: for example, the local offices of the Deutsche Volksbühne discussed with factory managers when the radio programmes would be broadcast to their workers. Regional newspapers in Saxony and Thuringia published images, reviews, and their own reports of the productions. A member of the Berliner Ensemble spoke to cultural functionaries in factories about the play, asking them to prepare the ground for the production.⁴⁸ The theatre argued that the quality of local functionaries' work made a real difference, commenting of the VEB-Anlagenbau:

Tüchtiger Kulturfunktionär, aufmerksame Betriebsleitung, sehr aufgeschlossene Belegschaft. Überfüllter Raum, sehr sorgfältig, ja, liebevoll hergerichtet, interessante Hinweise an den Wandzeitungen der BG, SED- und FDJ-Betriebsgruppe mit Bildern aus der *Mutter*.⁴⁹

The Berliner Ensemble's description of the performances' impact corresponds exactly to Brecht's aspirations: 'In anderen Betrieben diskutierten wenige Tage nach den Aufführungen die Arbeiter und Angestellten mit Beauftragten der Gewerkschaften und der Volksbühne über das Stück, erweiterten die Diskussion und sprachen über Schwierigkeiten in der politischen Arbeit und in der Produktion.'⁵⁰ A security guard from a furniture factory in Leubsdorf wrote in his survey response that he wanted the entire workforce to see the production, and that he would tell his colleagues about it so that even more of them would attend next time.⁵¹

The establishment of the *Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften* points to the FDGB's growing influence in cultural policy, and to the fact that the regime shared Brecht's view that the workplace should become a focal point for cultural activity. The FDGB had been extending its influence over the Deutsche Volksbühne, not just

⁴⁷ Copy of Adolf, 'Erfahrungsbericht über die I. Theaterwoche der Gewerkschaften', copy dated 4 July 1951, BArch DY 30/IV 2/9.06/194, p. 9. See also Schuhmann, p. 232.

⁴⁸ 'Einige Erfahrungen', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 403.

⁴⁹ Erich Franz, 'Frühjahrstournee im Rahmen der Theaterwochen des FDGB vom 23.4.-12.5.51', BBA 509/52-53 (p. 52).

⁵⁰ 'Einige Erfahrungen', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 403.

⁵¹ Gerhard Uhlig, 'Auch ich will meine Eindrücke geltend machen...', BArch DY 34/23541.

politically but also financially: Petra Rauschenbach notes that the FDGB had issued loans and bought shares in the organization, and a member of the FDGB's national executive, Walter Maschke, was appointed as its Deputy Chair.⁵² Following mounting criticisms of the Deutsche Volksbühne by the SED, the organization disbanded in 1953: Maschke argued that it was no longer needed to ensure that theatres performed progressive plays and that workers attended the theatre.⁵³ It was replaced by a system of block workplace subscriptions, the *Theateranrecht der Betriebe*, supervised by the FDGB.⁵⁴ The problem, though, was that the FDGB was not ready to replace the painstaking work that the Deutsche Volksbühne had done in liaising with audiences and drumming up interest in productions. Even Brecht – who had never previously been an advocate of the Volksbühne movement – wrote to Gustav Just, a member of the Culture Department of the Central Committee of the SED – to express his concern:

Die Volksbühne war immerhin eine gute, eingearbeitete, große Organisation, die monatlich bis zu 70 000 Zuschauer stellte und für Theaterkarten über 200.000,- DM garantierte. Meiner Meinung nach sollte man diese Organisation nicht einfach in den Papierkorb werfen, bevor man eine andere hat aufziehen können.⁵⁵

According to a work log in Kilian's archive, a meeting of heads of marketing for East Berlin's theatres noted in 1955 that the FDGB had done nothing so far to advertise the *Betriebsanrechte*; the same work log claims that one of the FDGB's own representatives admitted that the FDGB had completely failed to advertise on behalf of the Zentrales Anrecht.⁵⁶ The Berliner Ensemble's early investment in outreach activities meant that it was better placed than many theatres to compensate for the loss of the Deutsche Volksbühne.

As the Berliner Ensemble was based at the Deutsches Theater until autumn 1954, it was initially included in its *Anrecht*. The lack of a dedicated building was an obstacle to the Ensemble's initial efforts to build its own audience, and it was still establishing its reputation and profile in autumn 1955, its second season at the Theater

⁵² Petra Rauschenbach, 'Reflexionen zur Geschichte der Volksbühnenbewegung aus der Arbeit am Bestand DY 1 Deutsche Volksbühne 1945-1953', in *Mitteilungen aus dem Bundesarchiv*, 10.1 (spring 2002), 62-69 (pp. 65-66).

⁵³ [Walter Maschke], 'Diskussionsbeitrag zur Theaterkonferenz', sent by Maschke to [Gustav] Just, ZK-Abteilung Kultur, 16 January 1953, in BArch DY 30 IV 2/9.06/194.

⁵⁴ Schuhmann, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Letter from Brecht to Gustav Just, Berlin, 12 June 1953, in *BFA*, xxx (1998), 176-77 (p. 176).

⁵⁶ [Isot Kilian], 'Tagebuch', entries for 31 August 1955 and 12 September 1955, IKA 73-94.

am Schiffbauerdamm. Brecht's assistant Peter Palitzsch was told to add the theatre's address to the poster advertising *Pauken und Trompeten*, as 'Berliner Ensemble ist keine Adresse'.⁵⁷ Even after Brecht's high-profile successes with productions such as *Mutter Courage*, there was still confusion over what sorts of performances the Berliner Ensemble actually offered: one member of the company noted 'durch die Vielfalt der aufgetauchten Ensemblebildungen werden wir oft für ein Ensemble gehalten, das da singt und tanzt'.⁵⁸ Once the Berliner Ensemble was in its own premises, however, it lost no time in improving the GDR's new marketing structures, rather than simply using them. A common criticism of the *Betriebsanrecht* was that it was not giving workers the choice that they wanted. In fact, the FDGB actively opposed giving workers a free choice on the grounds that they would opt for operettas rather than theatre productions, and that it would be too much work to coordinate the ticket requests.⁵⁹ The Berliner Ensemble responded to the criticism by joining forces with the Komische Oper and pioneering the *Wunschanrecht*, offering spectators a free choice of day and play. The system was adopted by all of East Berlin's theatres in 1955-56.⁶⁰

The scope of the BE's advertising becomes clear from an internal report from February 1956: 1200 *Spielpläne* were sent out once a fortnight, and marketing materials were sent to 431 firms. The company even installed its own advertising pillars (*Werbesäulen*) in the Ministry of Finance canteen, the *Kulturraum* of the HO-Stalinallee BGL, the Staatliche Handelsinspektion, Deutsche Gummiwarenfabrik, and the Anrechtszentrale der Berliner Theater. At the Anrechtszentrale, according to the Berliner Ensemble's report, people gathered round the pillars even as they were being erected.⁶¹ Block bookings were important business for the company: in 1955, it received 193 block bookings from workplaces and schools, covering 7081 spectators – an average of 36.7 tickets per order.⁶² The Berliner Ensemble did suspect though that enemy agents were seeking to undermine its activities at the HO-Stalinallee: someone purporting to be a member of the theatre had allegedly telephoned the HO to cancel a forthcoming outreach visit, so that when members of the theatre arrived, they found no audience. The Berliner Ensemble had been working for two years to attract workers on the Stalinallee to the theatre, and its members suspected that agents in the HO were sabotaging their marketing activities: 'Große Mengen von Werbematerial wurden geliefert, es verschwand spurlos und kam nie an die Kollegen heran.'⁶³

⁵⁷ [Anon.], 'Protokoll der Werbebesprechung bei Frau Weigel am 24.9.1955', p. 1, BEA green lever arch file 'Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre'.

⁵⁸ [Anon.], 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung des Berliner Ensemble das Gesicht gegeben' [January 1956], p. 1. In BEA pink lever arch file 'Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre'.

⁵⁹ Schuhmann, pp. 242-43.

⁶⁰ 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung...', p. 2.

⁶¹ Rohde, BBA 1115/82-83.

⁶² 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung...', p. 3.

⁶³ Rohde, BBA 1115/81.

Whilst the workplace was at the centre of the Berliner Ensemble's marketing and outreach activities, the company remained committed to a more inclusive approach than government-led organizations. The Berliner Ensemble marketed its productions to small workplaces that were not covered by the FDGB, and it signed twenty contracts with such firms.⁶⁴ It was also keen to attract spectators from West Berlin. One report explained: 'Wir bemühen uns im Werbebüro unbürokratisch zu sein, sind zu jeder Mann [*sic*] höflich und freundlich, auch das zahlt sich aus und bringt finanziellen Nutzen.'⁶⁵ These efforts were not to be taken for granted at a time of growing Cold War tension, and they stand in contrast to evidence of active obstruction by the FDGB. After the Deutsche Volksbühne had been disbanded, the Berlin regional executive committee of the FDGB refused to release the names and addresses of the organization's members in West Berlin. Werner Thalheim criticized the FDGB for this in *Theater der Zeit*:

Die Volksbühne hatte etwa 6 000 Mitglieder in Westberlin. Es wäre Ehrensache des FDGB gewesen, diese mit unseren Theatern seit langem verbundenen Menschen sofort einzuladen und ihnen weiterhin den Theaterbesuch zu ermöglichen. Statt dessen verschloß der Bezirksvorstand die ihm übergebenen Anschriften dieser Besucher im Stahltesor und betrachtete sie als geheime Verschlusssache. Als dann Helene Weigel durch größte Anstrengungen nach monatelangem Warten schließlich an die Adressen herankam und einige Hunderte dieser ehemaligen Besucher zu einer Aussprache einlud, wurde sie von ihnen mit dem Ruf empfangen: 'Wir dachten schon, ihr hättet uns vergessen!'⁶⁶

This is a rare example of the Berliner Ensemble's initiatives being acknowledged in *Theater der Zeit* during the 1950s: editorial bias against epic theatre seems to have blinded critics such as Fritz Erpenbeck to the BE's innovative work to attract audiences.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung...', p. 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Thalheim, 'Stillstand bedeutet Rückschritt', p. 42.

⁶⁷ Fritz Erpenbeck, the editor-in-chief of *Theater der Zeit*, had been highly critical of Brecht's productions of *Mutter Courage* and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, stating in 1955: 'Ich lehne das epische Theater als gangbaren Weg in die Zukunft ab.' See Fritz Erpenbeck, 'Episches Theater oder Dramatik?', *Freies Volk* (Düsseldorf), 22 January 1955. For indications of editorial bias in *Theater der Zeit*, see e.g. the editorial comments on Hans-Joachim Bunge, 'Einige Mißverständnisse', *Theater der Zeit*, 10.3 (March 1955), 15-19 (p. 15), and on Peter Palitzsch and Manfred Wekwerth, 'Leipziger allerlei', *Theater der Zeit*, 10.3 (March 1955), 19-23 (p. 19).

Spectators at the Berliner Ensemble

In *Theaterarbeit*, the Berliner Ensemble constructed an image of its ideal working-class audience. A paragraph on *Herr Puntila* opens with a reference to 'unser neues Publikum, das sich ein neues Leben aufbaut und die Geschehnisse auf der Bühne nicht mehr einfach hinnimmt ("So ist es und so bleibt es wohl"), sondern kräftig mitredet'.⁶⁸ The volume substantiated this claim by citing exemplary reactions from individual spectators, such as *Held der Arbeit* Hans Garbe. Garbe endorsed the authenticity of *Die Mutter*, related the action to his own experiences, and recounted how he had spoken about it the next day to his colleagues.⁶⁹ In keeping with the Berliner Ensemble's inclusive view of its audience, *Theaterarbeit* quoted a letter to Helene Weigel from 'ein Genosse aus Westberlin', dated 11 February 1951:

Ich bin ein Genosse aus Westberlin und es kam so, daß ich in letzter Zeit etwas müde wurde, gegen die Bösheit unserer Klassenfeinde und die Dummheit der Klassengenossen zu kämpfen. Und gestern habe ich Deine 'Mutter' gesehen und da habe ich wieder einen großen Mut bekommen, und es ist allen anderen Genossen so gegangen.⁷⁰

In *Theaterarbeit*, these exemplary reactions stand in metonymically for the whole, fostering the impression that the ideal working-class audience already exists. Yet an entry in Brecht's journal dated 4 March 1953, two years after the publication of *Theaterarbeit*, offers a very different view:

Unsere Aufführungen in Berlin haben fast kein Echo mehr. In der Presse erscheinen Kritiken Monate nach der Erstaufführung, und es steht nichts drin, außer ein paar kümmerlichen soziologischen Analysen. Das Publikum ist das Kleinbürgerpublikum der Volksbühne, Arbeiter machen da kaum sieben Prozent aus. Die Bemühungen sind nur dann nicht ganz sinnlos, wenn die Spielweise späterhin aufgenommen werden kann, d.h. wenn ihr

The first page of the article by Palitzsch and Wekwerth carries the note:

'Anmerkung der Redaktion: "Der Aufgeblasene halt jeden für dumm, der wider ihn spricht." *Altes chinesisches Sprichwort.*'

⁶⁸ [Anon.], 'Prologe, Gesang zwischen den Szenen und Szenentitel', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 20.

⁶⁹ 'Hans Garbe über die Aufführung', in *Theaterarbeit*, pp. 168-70.

⁷⁰ Quoted in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 338.

Lehrwert einmal realisiert wird. (Das gilt, obwohl wir alles tun, für jetzt, für die Theaterabende, für das Publikum von jetzt unser Bestes zu liefern.)⁷¹

The mood expressed here is one of pessimism and frustration, not just at the lack of support from the cultural political establishment and its media, but at the stubbornly low proportion of working-class spectators, set against the efforts that the Berliner Ensemble was making. Brecht does, characteristically, attempt to salvage grounds for hope, yet defers this to a distant future.

The surviving archive material allows us to compare these two views of the Berliner Ensemble's audience with direct and indirect evidence of spectatorship at its performances in the 1950s. There are four key sources of information: minutes of meetings of the Berliner Ensemble's *Besucherrat*, questionnaires completed by workers at performances during the *Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften*, reports of post-show discussions, and the *Abendberichte* written by Brecht's assistants after performances. They offer an insight into the impact of the Berliner Ensemble's outreach work – its extent and its limits – and they enable us to contextualize the disappointment that Brecht expressed in March 1953. They also allow us to go beyond the speculation about the theatre's audiences to be found in some accounts, such as Kristopher Imbrigotta's suggestions as to how spectators would 'ideally' respond to the BE's programmes and publicity material.⁷²

The Berliner Ensemble's *Besucherrat* was created on 25 November 1954, two months after the start of the company's first season at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm.⁷³ Its creation was not an independent initiative, unlike the theatre's earlier forays into outreach work, but a response to FDGB policy. In an effort to compensate for the loss of the Deutsche Volksbühne's work with audiences, the FDGB had instructed theatres to undertake '[die] Bildung eines Besucherrates, der regelmäßig Wünsche und Meinungen der Gewerkschaftsmitglieder zur Spielplangestaltung und zu den Aufführungen entgegennimmt'.⁷⁴ We should not imagine, though, that the *Besucherrat* was dominated by workers from the factory floor. Its members included representatives of the Ministry for Foreign and Inner-German Trade; the Ministry for the Construction of Machinery for Heavy Industry; the media (the Arbeiterclub der Täglichen Rundschau, Staatliches Rundfunkkomitee, Verlag 'Die Wirtschaft'); the SED Tiergarten; and education (the Institut für Lehrerbildung and the Humboldt-

⁷¹ Bertolt Brecht, journal entry for 4 March 1953, *BFA*, xxvii, 346.

⁷² Kristopher Imbrigotta, '(Re)Building the Engaged Spectator: The *Katzgraben* Programmhefte of the Berliner Ensemble, 1953/1972', *The Brecht Yearbook*, 39 (2014), 91-111 (p. 108).

⁷³ 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung...', p. 4.

⁷⁴ Dieter Nachtigall, 'Warum Besucherräte?', *Theater der Zeit*, 10.2 (February 1955), 36-37. The directive was issued on 1 April 1953, and the delay in the formation of the BE's *Besucherrat* can be attributed to the fact that it only moved into its own premises in September 1954.

Universität).⁷⁵ Professor J., who worked at the Institut für Lehrerbildung, commented: 'Es ist auch auffallend, dass so viele Vertreter von anderen Betrieben und nicht direkt Produktionsbetriebe hier sind.'⁷⁶ Weigel's impression at a meeting in December 1957 was that very few workers from large workplaces were now coming to the Berliner Ensemble – a comment that echoes the concerns that Brecht had expressed in his journal entry of 1953.⁷⁷

The minutes of the *Besucherrat's* meetings offer an insight into the Berliner Ensemble's difficulties in boosting working-class theatre attendance. The theatre was seen by some as too political,⁷⁸ particularly in its examination of themes associated with the recent past. A representative of the Reichsbahnausbesserungswerk Schöneweide reportedly explained:

Auch in diesem Betrieb ist es sehr schwer, die Kollegen für das Berliner Ensemble zu interessieren; bei Vorstellungen durch das Zentrale Anrecht in unserem Haus kommen die Kollegen zu ihm und fragen nach dem Stück, wenn sie hören *Winterschlacht*, möchten sie am liebsten die Karten weitergeben. Schon der Titel sagt nicht zu, es hat mit Krieg zu tun.⁷⁹

There were similar reports of problems at the VEB Gummiwerk Weißensee:

Die Kollegen standen dem Berliner Ensemble ablehnend gegenüber, es gelang trotzdem, einen Vertrag mit uns abzuschließen. Die erste Vorstellung war *Pauken und Trompeten*, Koll[egi]n Hoffmann beklagte sich bei mir, daß sie danach viel Ärger hatte, die Kollegen sagten fast alle, es wäre ihnen zu ordinär gewesen, auch lieben sie keine Stücke mit Soldaten.⁸⁰

Two members reported that workers simply preferred to go for a drink, or to the Friedrichstadtpalast or Metropol-Theater, after a hard day's work.⁸¹ Even so, members

⁷⁵ [Anon.], 'Protokoll der Besucherrats-Sitzung am Dienstag, dem 3.12., 18 Uhr im Nebenraum der Kantine', p. 1, BEA green lever arch file 'Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre'.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁹ Rohde, BBA 1115/85.

⁸⁰ Ibid., BBA 1115/84.

⁸¹ 'Protokoll der Besucherrats-Sitzung am Dienstag', p. 7. The Anhaltisches Landestheater had encountered similar problems in boosting working-class attendance in 1949, when it had sought to boost membership of the Deutsche

of the *Besucherrat* were often willing to try to change workers' minds: one asked for a recording of extracts from the plays, and another – representing the VEB Herrenmode – wanted to give away tickets to *Mutter Courage* as prizes on Women's Day.⁸² So whilst the reports of the *Besucherrat* chart the difficulties that the Berliner Ensemble faced in attracting working-class spectators, they also show that the company had succeeded in finding partners in workplaces, who were willing to act as its advocates. This was not to be taken for granted: Werner Thalheim claimed that institutions that sought to establish closer contacts with workers 'scheiterten [...] oft an der gleichgültigen, amüsischen Einstellung vieler Gewerkschaftsfunktionäre'. In his view, 'Enttäuschungen und Verärgierungen sind die Ergebnisse manch redlichen Bemühens'.⁸³

In *Theater der Zeit*, Dieter Nachtigall – a member of the *Besucherrat* at the Komische Oper – criticized the FDGB's creation of the *Besucherräte*, arguing that most functioned simply as 'eine [...] überflüssige Beschwerdeweitergabestelle'.⁸⁴ One meeting at the Berliner Ensemble did record a number of complaints: that there was not enough choice at the buffet in the theatre foyer, and that there were empty seats in the stalls but no tickets available at the box office – a complaint that corroborates criticism in *Theater der Zeit* of the new system of workplace subscriptions.⁸⁵ But the Berliner Ensemble was quick to spot the political value of the complaints expressed by the *Besucherrat*: a report noted that Weigel could use their complaints – for example about the state of the theatre's carpets – when petitioning the authorities for improvements.⁸⁶ After all, a member of the *Besucherrat* had spent twenty minutes in the government box with Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl after one performance, and Grotewohl had asked to see the *Besucherrat* journal.⁸⁷ The *Besucherrat* also engaged with questions of artistic practice: on 1 February 1955, the group discussed *Winterschlacht*, while a meeting on 7 February 1956 focused on *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*.⁸⁸ These initiatives indicate that the BE's

Volksbühne by offering up to ten free performances in factories each month. Its dramaturge reported: 'der zahlenmäßige Erfolg steht bisher in keinem Verhältnis zur aufgewandten Arbeit'. See Heinz Thiel, 'Volksbühne und Theater – Hand in Hand: Aus der Praxis der kulturellen Betriebsarbeit', *Volk und Kunst*, 1.5 (September/October 1949), 30-32 (p. 31).

⁸² Rohde, BBA 1115/85.

⁸³ Werner Thalheim, 'Theater – Betriebe – Gewerkschaften', *Theater der Zeit*, 10.10 (October 1955), 44-46.

⁸⁴ Nachtigall, p. 36.

⁸⁵ 'Protokoll der Besucherrats-Sitzung am Dienstag', p. 2; Heinz Hoffmann, 'Theaterbesuch zu billig? Wir sprachen mit Verwaltungsdirektoren und Werbeleitern', *Theater der Zeit*, 11.8 (August 1956), 37-40 (p. 39).

⁸⁶ 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung...', p. 4.

⁸⁷ 'Protokoll der Besucherrats-Sitzung am Dienstag', p. 11.

⁸⁸ Bi-, 'Diskussion mit dem Besucherrat am 1.2.1955 18,00 Uhr (Kantine)', pp. 1-15, in BEA green lever arch file 'Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen

Besucherrat was working along the lines that Nachtigall recommended in *Theater der Zeit* and that he attributed to the work of his own *Besucherrat* at the Komische Oper.⁸⁹ The meeting on 9 February 1956 also indicates that the *Besucherrat* had objected to a review in *Neues Deutschland* that criticized Brecht's production of *Kreidekreis*. The *Besucherrat* was not satisfied with the newspaper's response to its objection, and invited representatives of *Neues Deutschland* to its next meeting.⁹⁰ It is clear from this that the *Besucherrat* was acting as an advocate for the Berliner Ensemble, trying to hold critics to account for their reviews. This evidence of audience engagement relativizes some of the pessimism expressed in Brecht's journal entry of 1953.

The regional associations of the Deutsche Volksbühne in Thuringia and Saxony surveyed workers who attended performances of *Die Mutter* during the *I. Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften* in 1951. These questionnaires, together with spectators' reports collected by the Deutsche Volksbühne in Brandenburg during the *Theaterwochen*, show how positively workers responded to the framing of the performances as a special event. Workers from Brandenburg, who travelled to Berlin in a train hired by the FDGB, were deeply impressed by the train's dining car, clubroom, and tannoy system; those who saw the production in Chemnitz wrote in equally glowing terms about the new Kulturpalast in which the performances were staged.⁹¹ The regional executive of the Deutsche Volksbühne Saxony singled out *Die Mutter* as having made a particularly lasting impression on spectators, noting that it had attracted more responses from spectators in Chemnitz than any other production in the *Theaterwochen*.⁹² Spectators repeatedly highlighted the authenticity of the text and acting, and a railway worker described it as 'das grösste und schönste, was ich je erlebt habe'.⁹³ The regional executive in Saxony – perhaps mindful of criticisms of the play's form during the SED's campaign against Formalism in March 1951 – argued that these responses contradicted those who had argued that the play was too difficult for workers and that the performance style would be too alien for them.⁹⁴ The one element in the acting that did jar with several workers was the use of caricature in the presentation of the strikebreakers and the landlady. A twenty-year-old female worker from the VEB Blechwalzwerk complained that the 'heilige Frau' often seemed ridiculous even though

50er Jahre'; 'Protokoll der Besucherrats-Sitzung am 7.2. im Nebenraum der Kantine', BBA 1115/88-89.

⁸⁹ Nachtigall, p. 36.

⁹⁰ According to another report, the letter sent by the *Besucherrat* to *Neues Deutschland* was three pages long. See 'Kollege Palitzsch hat der Werbung...', p. 4.

⁹¹ Ernst Hase and others, 'Landbespielung', pp. 7-7a, BArch DY 30 IV 3/9.06/194.

⁹² Deutsche Volksbühne Landesleitung Sachsen, 'Bericht über die Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften im Land Sachsen', 31 May 1951, p. 3, BArch DY 34/23541.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9; "'Die Mutter" 2: Margot Kromer', BArch DY 34/23541.

⁹⁴ Deutsche Volksbühne Landesleitung Sachsen, p. 3, BArch DY 34/23541. For criticism of *Die Mutter* during the campaign against Formalism, see e.g. Hans Lauter, ed., *Der Kampf gegen den Formalismus in Kunst und Literatur, für eine fortschrittliche deutsche Kultur* (East Berlin: Dietz, 1951), p. 51 and p. 131.

she should have been serious, a view that was endorsed by an engine mechanic from the same firm and by ten signatories from Scharfenstein.⁹⁵ These workers expected the landlady's religious statements to be treated seriously as a sign of devotion, whereas Brecht had sought to expose them as bigotry and hypocrisy. Several workers also objected to the half-curtain: a representative of the Kulturkommission Olympia criticized the fact that the scene changes could be seen from the upper circle, complaining: 'wir wurden durch diese technischen Mängel in der Illusion, d.h. in der richtigen Aufnahme des Stückes, gestört'.⁹⁶ Again, we can see from this how some workers' prior expectations of theatre led them to object to specific epic techniques, not realizing that Brecht had used a half-curtain precisely in order to render the mechanics of the production visible. But these critical comments did not diminish the very clear enthusiasm for the production, and in Dresden a key complaint was that the supply of tickets was insufficient to meet the high level of demand.⁹⁷

As the questionnaires and reports did not allow a dialogue between the Berliner Ensemble and trade union spectators to unfold, it is instructive to see how a discussion of the half-curtain developed among workers at the Zentralschule der Maschinen-Ausleih-Station in Berlin-Wartenberg, who saw a production of *Herr Puntila* on 8 January 1952. The spectators raised similar objections to the trade union audiences; one spectator commented: 'Der Vorhang war sehr primitiv, war nicht hoch genug. Es sah aus, als ob ein Segel aufgespannt war.'⁹⁸ Another spoke of how the half-curtain allowed him to view the interaction between two actors during a scene change: 'Ich sass im zweiten Rang. [...] Nachdem der Vorhang zu war, ging Matti herunter [vom Hatelmaberg], der Gutsbesitzer hielt ihm die Hand hin, aber der Chauffeur winkte ab, scheinbar leben sie nicht gerade in Freundschaft. Das alles hat mich sehr gestört.'⁹⁹ Yet this was not the total rejection that it seemed: one spectator said that they had only commented because the half-curtain stood out as unusual; another said that it would be better not to use a curtain at all, so that all the changes were visible.¹⁰⁰ The workers understood the rationale for the half-curtain when it was explained to them, but still found it too much of a distraction. The Berliner Ensemble made several changes in response to their comments, deciding not to let the moon descend during the songs, to avoid causing a disturbance.¹⁰¹ The theatre also agreed to make the markings on the

⁹⁵ Kühn and others, 'Theaterwochen: Urteile über ihren allgemeinen Wert', p. 2 and p. 4, BArch DY 34/23541.

⁹⁶ Hans Jahn, 'Stellungnahme anlässlich der "Theaterwoche der Gewerkschaften" zur Aufführung "Die Mutter"', BEA file 5, MK12.

⁹⁷ Hans Ullner, 'Bericht über die Durchführung der Dresdner Theaterwoche vom 22.-28.4.1951', p. 1, BArch DY 34/23541.

⁹⁸ [Anon.], 'Diskussion über "Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti" in der Zentral-Schule der MAS, Berlin-Wartenberg, am 8.1.1952', BBA 509/63-69 (p. 64).

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 65.

carpet less obtrusive, as it looked to the workers as if the carpet was stained.¹⁰² There is evidence of a real engagement by spectators with the content, as workers argued that Matti's left-wing views were totally atypical of the chauffeurs that they had known – a view which reveals a sensitivity to political distinctions between employees and workers that is not reflected in this particular play.¹⁰³

The Berliner Ensemble's internal reports of each evening's performance provide further, unvarnished accounts of the theatre's encounters with its audiences. These reports do not offer the same level of insight into reactions as reports of post-show discussions: they focus instead on signs of attentiveness, boredom, agreement, or displeasure: school pupils causing disturbances and throwing sweet papers; spectators who fell asleep or had coughing fits; one spectator even vomited.¹⁰⁴ Some spectators simply did not react as expected, and they are variously cast in the *Abendberichte* as stubborn or lethargic.¹⁰⁵ One report on *Pauken und Trompeten* reported that the performance was good, but the audience failed; on another occasion, an assistant wrote that he would have liked to throw the audience out of the theatre.¹⁰⁶ These reports were designed to identify problems rather than to report what was routinely working well; in this respect, they are like the complaints that members of the *Besucherrat* expressed about the fabric of the theatre and the food available at the buffet. They offer a useful corrective to the rhetorical celebration of the new audience in *Theaterarbeit*, but they need to be kept in context. Commenting on the way in which the stagings themselves came across in the *Abendberichte*, Brecht's assistant Peter Palitzsch wrote that the reports gave the impression that a louse was pissing on a Picasso, but that the production left him stunned every time.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

In *Theaterarbeit*, Brecht and his collaborators set out the task facing the Berliner Ensemble: 'Das Theater hat die würdige Aufgabe, an der gründlichen Umgestaltung des

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Kilian, 'ABENDBERICHT WINTERSCHLACHT, Donnerstag d. 17. März 1955'; Voigt, 'ABENDBERICHT WINTERSCHLACHT 14. Februar 1955'; Voigt, 'ABENDBERICHT MUTTER 28. Februar 1955'; Rüdiger Graf, 'Montag, 19. März: Die Ziehtochter'; these four reports are all in BEA file 'Abendberichte 1952-55'. See also Friedrichs, 'Abendbericht: Galilei 24 IV 57', BEA file 'Abendberichte 1956-58'.

¹⁰⁵ See e.g. Tragelehn, 'ABENDBERICHT: Pauken 13.V.'; Tragelehn, 'ABENDBERICHT: Kreidekreis 12.III'; Rüdiger Graf, 'Donnerstag, 2. Feber [sic]: Die Ziehtochter'; these reports are all in BEA file 'Abendberichte 1952-55'.

¹⁰⁶ Voigt, 'PAUKEN Abendbericht 11. März'; Graf, 'Donnerstag, 2. Feber'; both in BEA file 'Abendberichte 1952-55'.

¹⁰⁷ Palitzsch, 'Abendregie-Bericht "Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder", 18.1.53', BEA file 'Abendregie 1952-1957'.

Zusammenlebens der Menschen mitzuarbeiten.¹⁰⁸ This was presented not as the aim of Brecht or the government, but as a task bestowed on it by its new audience: ‘Es bekommt von einem neuen Publikum die Verpflichtung und das Privileg, veraltete Anschauungen [...] zu bekämpfen und frische Einsichten und sozialistische Impulse zu vermitteln.’¹⁰⁹ This ideal audience existed mainly in the abstract, and the Berliner Ensemble invested an immense amount of time and energy in trying to make it a reality: in taking specially designed shows to audiences in workplaces and prisons, putting up advertising columns in workplaces, selling tickets directly to workers, and conducting post-show discussions. Persuading workers to visit the Berliner Ensemble itself was often an uphill task, and one negative experience at the theatre could put workers off returning. Whilst feedback from the *Besucherrat* brings out the difficulties that cultural functionaries faced in engaging with workers, qualitative feedback from post-show discussions indicates how some of the workers who did attend performances engaged with them and how they responded to Brecht’s epic techniques. The statistics for 1955 show that the Berliner Ensemble was already attracting larger audiences at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm than expected. The average occupancy was 79%, and the highest was 90% in March, enabling the theatre to exceed its financial target by DM 110,000.¹¹⁰ However, the apparently low proportion of working-class spectators remained a disappointment.

Given the scale of the Berliner Ensemble’s outreach activity, it is striking that the theatre’s efforts to attract working-class audiences did not find mention in *Theater der Zeit*, unlike those at the Komische Oper.¹¹¹ Whilst *Neues Deutschland* did feature an article on the BE’s early outreach work with workers at Kabelwerk Oberspree, it made only the briefest mention of its role in the *Woche der Betriebe* and ignored its contribution to the *Theaterwochen der Gewerkschaften*.¹¹² The Deutsche Volksbühne and FDGB were more interested in *Patenschaftsverträge* and *Freundschaftsverträge* between theatres and amateur groups in individual workplaces, and Walter Maschke’s letter to Helene Weigel indicates a concern that the Berliner Ensemble’s independent initiatives might actually undermine the Deutsche Volksbühne’s efforts to attract more members. The Berliner Ensemble’s direct contact with spectators increasingly took on the role of counteracting public criticism of the company. In September 1955, Weigel told colleagues that she wanted to have discussions with spectators in small groups, and that the press must not be invited, as it only created confusion.¹¹³ The irony and missed opportunity is that SED critics such as Fritz Erpenbeck spent the early 1950s battling

¹⁰⁸ p., ‘Falsche Darstellungen neuer Stücke’, in *Theaterarbeit*, pp. 285-88 (p. 285).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ [Anon.], ‘Protokoll der Betriebsvollversammlung am 4. Januar 1956’, p. 2, BEA pink lever arch file, ‘Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen, Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre’.

¹¹¹ See e.g. Nachtigall, pp. 36-37; Thalheim, ‘Theater – Betriebe – Gewerkschaften’, pp. 44-46.

¹¹² Ernst Müller, ‘Keine Unterschätzung der Kulturarbeit mehr!’, *Neues Deutschland* (East Berlin), 13 September 1950.

¹¹³ ‘Protokoll der Werbebesprechung bei Frau Weigel am 24.9.1955’, p. 4.

Brecht's theatre – a theatre that the SED would celebrate after his death – when it was in the vanguard of attempts to transform theatre attendance in the GDR. This task may have been harder than Brecht had initially hoped, but in the early 1950s, when the Berliner Ensemble faced its most concerted attacks, it was making a better job of delivering government cultural policy on outreach than many of its competitors.