

HEARING: BRECHT

A One-Act Play

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

BRECHT, 49-Male - A Marxist Playwright

JOE, 40-Male - An American politician and lawyer

HUAC, any age, gender - A politician and attorney for HUAC

HUAC2, any age, gender - A politician and attorney for HUAC

SETTINGS

A theater whose set is made in part to resemble a courtroom where the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings took place.

HEARING: BRECHT

The center of the stage is set to look like a Court of Law, though as you might find it in a senate hearing, in particular, the House Un-American Activities Committee Hearings. Stage left there is a large table where a number of people can sit and do the interrogating. Stage right is a smaller table where one person can sit and be interrogated.

On the outskirts of the stage, we can see what is essentially normally concealed in the wings of the theater. There is a prop table. There is a blue light. Etc.

Downstage right, just apart from the courtroom set is an easel, which has a stack of placards on it, the current one with the title of the show: HEARING: BRECHT

HUAC enters followed by HUAC2. They each in turn stop by the prop table, grab a signature prop which helps define them, finds their position on the courtroom stage and then freezes in a pose or gesture.

Finally, BRECHT enters. He walks up to the prop table, grabs a pair of characteristically Brecht-styled glasses and puts them on.

He then heads over to the easel and removes the first placard revealing a second. This sign reads: *HUAC tries and fails to get Brecht to admit he's a communist.*

Brecht smiles at this. Then, finds his position on the courtroom stage, no doubt by the smaller table, strikes his pose and freezes.

Hearing: Brecht 2.

A moment later, the action begins,
already mid-scene.

HUAC

Are you now or have you ever been a member of the communist party?

BRECHT

(In perfect english)

I'm sorry. My english is not great. Can you repeat the question?

HUAC

Your english sounds pretty good.

BRECHT

Refrigerator?

HUAC

I beg your pardon?

BRECHT

My english is not great.

HUAC

What game are you playing at, Mr. Brecht?

BRECHT

(Correcting)

Mr. Brecht (pronounced Bresht).

HUAC

I have your name listed here as Bertolt Brecht. Are you not Bertolt Brecht?

BRECHT

That depends on who you're asking.

HUAC

I am asking you.

BRECHT

If you are asking me the character Bertolt Brecht, then yes I am Bertolt Brecht, though I prefer you pronounce it Bertolt Bresht, as all of my research has suggested as much. If you are asking me the actor playing Bertolt Brecht, then I don't care how you pronounce Bertolt Brecht, my name is Geoffrey.

HUAC

What game are you playing at, Mr... Bresht?

BRECHT

I am not playing any games at the moment. Though last night my son and I had a rousing match of Cossacks and Robbers.

HUAC

Cossacks and robbers?

BRECHT

I don't understand the question.

HUAC

Did you just say cossacks and robbers?

BRECHT

You just said cossacks and robbers.

HUAC

(Growing frustrated)

Are you now or have you ever been a member of the communist party?

BRECHT

My english is not great.

HUAC

I think your english is perfectly fine and this is just an attempt by you to obfuscate the truth.

BRECHT

If by obfuscate you mean to make so confused or opaque as to be difficult to perceive then all I can tell you is... my english is not great.

HUAC

This is absurd!

BRECHT

I agree.

HUAC2

Perhaps we need to try a more forceful approach.

BRECHT

I don't think that's necessary.

HUAC2

Let me try. I'll get some answers out of him.

(Then, to Brecht)

Would you say you're a capitalist, Mr. Brecht?

BRECHT

(Correcting)

Mr. Brecht (pronounced Bresht).

HUAC2

It doesn't matter how you pronounce it. You know who I'm talking to.

BRECHT

I don't know who you're talking to. You could be talking to the character. You could be talking to the actor. You could be talking the human.

HUAC2

I am talking to a man who is in serious danger of being held in contempt of these proceedings.

BRECHT

Ah. The character.

HUAC2

You understand the repercussions if you continue to be uncooperative?

BRECHT

It is not my intent to be uncooperative.

HUAC2

And yet you won't answer a simple question.

BRECHT

You haven't asked simple questions, only loaded ones.

HUAC2

Would you say that you are a capitalist?

BRECHT

I would say it if the script so demanded.

HUAC2

I am not interested in a play reading. Only the truth.

BRECHT

Plays reveal truth.

HUAC2

This is nonsense.

BRECHT

At least, they're supposed to. In the hands of a capable company who is committed to presenting truth. A company who has the courage to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the cunning to spread the truth among such persons.

HUAC2

What kind of company is this, I wonder. Communist?

BRECHT

Theatrical.

HUAC2

I ask again. Are you a capitalist?

BRECHT

I am a librettist.

HUAC2

(To HUAC)

Look up Librettist and see if it's a branch of capitalism!

HUAC

I don't think this is working.

BRECHT

(To the audience)

If *this* is another word for capitalism, I couldn't agree more.

HUAC

We're not talking to you, sir.

BRECHT

Just as well. I wasn't talking to you either.

HUAC2

Who were you talking to?

BRECHT

I was talking to them.

HUAC2

To whom?

BRECHT

The audience.

HUAC2

We are the only audience for whom you need to be concerned.
You will address us and us alone, Mr. Brecht.

BRECHT

Mr. Brecht (pronounced Bresht).

JOE

YOU ARE IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, SIR!

A spotlight on JOE, who has just entered. He grabs his signature prop, which is a pistol, and does a signature pose, which is akin to a pose a cowboy might make.

JOE

We will pronounce your name the way we like.

BRECHT

You are?

JOE

In charge, Mr. Breccccht.

Joe walks ominously towards Brecht.

JOE

I would like to hear more about this theater company of yours whose mission it is to present truth.

BRECHT

That's not just my theater company. I'm sure many theater companies strive for truth and even endeavor to change the world, just mine has a more effective way of going about it.

JOE

And what is your company's way?

BRECHT

Verfremdungseffekt.

A spotlight on Brecht as he
addresses the audience.

BRECHT

He won't know what this is and perhaps some of you won't
either, so a quick lesson.

Brecht removes the first placard
revealing a second. The sign now
reads: *Brecht describes his
technique Verfremdungseffekt.*

BRECHT

Verfremdungseffekt is translated as estrangement or
defamiliarization. Basically it is a distancing effect. A
technique used in my theater productions to prevent you, the
audience, from losing yourself completely in the narrative.

You will find that a narrative either disguises and obscures
the structure of evil social forces, OR reveals and exposes
them. I wish to do the latter and I find creating distance
between you and the story is the best way to do that.

How do I create such distance? There are various techniques,
breaking the fourth wall being one of them. These placards
being another. Showing you the mechanics of the stage, which
serve to remind you that you are not in a court of law but
actually in a theater.

(Pointing to things)

Look, these are stage lights. That's a prop table. There's
the woman who forgot to turn off her cell phone. Here are two
actors making out backstage.

HUAC2 and HUAC did indeed just get
caught starting to make out in the
onstage wings.

BRECHT

The things you only find in a theater!

I don't want you to think you are actually watching the House
Un-American Activities Committee hearings. Why? Because I am
not interested in having you come to my shows for purposes of
escapism. I don't want you to escape. I want you to engage. I
want to make you a conscious, critical observer.

(MORE)

Hearing: Brecht 8.

BRECHT (CONT'D)

I want my art actively involved in changing the world, rather than merely 'imitating' it.

When you imitate in the theater, as Aristotle preached with his views of tragedy and his concepts of mimesis and catharsis and unified plot, you demobilize your audience, put them in a hypnotic stupor, a fog, if you will, and that doesn't interest me. Empathy, in the context of theater, doesn't interest me. I believe that empathy destroys the audience's critical capacity. And I want you thinking critically. I want your senses awakened and your brain contemplating how you can change your social system.

That is why I use...

Brecht removes the current placard
and notices the new one now reads:
Brecht is on the ropes.

JOE

Verfremdungseffekt? I am quite certain, sir, THAT... is not a word.

BRECHT

(Still affected by placard)

It most definitely is a word.

JOE

Not an American one. Maybe Russian perhaps.

BRECHT

It is a German word.

JOE

So, you admit it.

BRECHT

Admit what?

JOE

You're Russian.

BRECHT

I am not Russian. I am German.

JOE

And the difference is?

BRECHT

Russians are from Russia.

JOE

You seem to know a lot about Russia for someone who claims NOT to be Russian.

BRECHT

I assure you I am not Russian. I am German.

JOE

Let's assume for a moment you are telling the truth-

BRECHT

I am telling the truth!

JOE

(To HUAC)

Weren't we just at war with the Germans?

HUAC

We were just at war with the Germans.

BRECHT

You were at war with the Nazis.

JOE

(To HUAC)

And the Nazis were from where again?

HUAC

I believe they were from-

She checks her notes.

HUAC

-Yes, they were from Germany.

JOE

Are you a Nazi, Mr. Brecccccht?

BRECHT

Of course I'm not a Nazi.

JOE

But you're from Germany.

BRECHT

Not everyone born in Germany was a Nazi. Albert Einstein was born in Germany.

JOE

(To HUAC)

PUT EINSTEIN ON THE LIST!

HUAC writes Einstein's name down in her notes.

JOE

(To Brecht, feeling accomplished)

Thank you, Mr. Breccccht. That's one name. Have you any others?

BRECHT

You think Einstein is a Nazi?

JOE

We're not talking about Einstein. We're talking about you.

BRECHT

Yes, first you think I'm a communist. Now you think I'm with the Third Reich. Make up your mind.

JOE

To us, they are one and the same.

BRECHT

They are hardly the same!

JOE

So which is it then?

BRECHT

Must I be one or the other?

JOE

This is America. You can be whatever you want to be. But YES you MUST be ONE or the OTHER! So are you a Communist or are you a Nazi?

BRECHT

I am most definitely not a Nazi. I have written a number of poems, songs, and plays in the fight against Hitler.

JOE

(Dripping with condescension)

Oooh! You fought Hitler with your plays, did you? Thank you for your service. I bet that really hurt him.

BRECHT

More than your condescension suggests. The pen, after all, is mightier than the sword.

JOE

Said the person who never held a sword.

BRECHT

I would choose a pen over a sword even if I was trapped on an island and could only bring one thing with me. For the things I would write with my pen will far outlast the things you will destroy with your sword.

JOE

Really? What would you write these things on? If you could only bring one thing with you.

He turns to HUAC

JOE

Take note, Mr. Breccccht admitted to being a communist.

BRECHT

I admitted no such thing.

JOE

I asked you if you were a Nazi or a Communist, you said you were most definitely not a Nazi.

BRECHT

I never said I was a Communist.

JOE

You don't need to. The exclusion says all.

(To HUAC)

How does the phrase go?

HUAC

Which phrase, sir?

JOE

The rhyming phrase.

(To Brecht)

(MORE)

JOE (CONT'D)

If it rhymes you know it must be true.

(To HUAC)

Admission by...

HUAC

What does it rhyme with?

JOE

It rhymes with admission. Admission by...

HUAC

Ignition?

HUAC2

Magician?

HUAC

Crawfishin'?

JOE

It rhymes with admission and the phrase suggests a type of evidence to be used against a defendant in a court of law.

HUAC2

Circumcision?

BRECHT

(Frustrated)

OMISSION!

JOE

That's right! Omission! You fell right into my trap, Mr. Breccccht. I know you are a communist because of your admission by omission.

HUAC2

It rhymes so it must be true!

BRECHT

More like admission by revision.

HUAC2

Fuuuck. That rhymes, as well. Can they both be true?

JOE

What am I revising?

BRECHT

You're revising history is what you're doing. Rewriting this very encounter to suit your needs.

JOE

Oh, am I the playwright here? Am I doing the writing? I don't think so. I think that's you. You're the playwright.

You know how I know you're a playwright? Because all you playwrights are the same. Heavy on the talk. Light on the results.

You all say you want to change the world, each writing a different manifesto on how to do it, and in the end what have you changed? Financial inequality? Racism? Sexism? Did one of your little pageants solve those issues for us? Is that why you pat yourselves on the back so much with your awards shows and your walk of fame? Because you played pretend and now all is right in the world?

BRECHT

You dismiss all the good that theater has done.

JOE

Maybe you're right.

(Then to HUAC)

Remind me again what it was that effectively ended World War II. Was it the Atom Theater?

HUAC

I believe it was the Atom Bomb, sir.

JOE

The Atom Bomb. Right. Thank you. I always get those two confused.

(Then)

What good, Mr. Breccccht? What have you done, but talk a lot of talk? Because when I look out there things don't seem to be much better. Do you really want to change the world?

BRECHT

Of course I do. Don't you?

JOE

No. I don't. Not at all. I'd like to keep it the same.

BRECHT

You just said things don't seem to be much better. How can you not want to change that?

JOE

Well, they're better for me.

I think the more important question is, how come you CAN'T seem to change that? You're doing your verfremdungseffekt, aren't you? Are you sure you're doing it correctly?

(Pointedly)

Or maybe it doesn't work. Maybe theater doesn't work to change the world. And your theater is worse than most because you don't even let your audience have empathy.

Brecht looks at Joe incredulously.

JOE

Yes, I heard your little direct address. Just because you talk to the audience, you think that means I can't hear you?

Brecht did think that.

JOE

You're doing your distancing effect. Keeping your audience at arms length, forcing them to think critically.

(Sarcastically)

What a treat for them!

Good Christ, man! They think critically all week long in the real world, you can't even give them one night off here in the theater? A little escape for two hours so they can put their worries behind them? No. You put them to work. Making them your pawns to change a world that never seems to change.

(Sarcastically)

Be AFRAID world leaders and social systems! It's the theater! Be afraid. They're here to overthrow us with their fecklessness!

(Pointing to the audience)

They have their army of rational thinkers with them.

Joe talks directly to the audience.

JOE

Though if you were really thinking rationally, you'd realize he's asking you to fight a war without even paying you. He's charging you, in fact! \$150 a ticket or something obscene like that. What a scam! He's a real public servant, isn't he! A true gift to society, this Breccccht.

I tell you, there's Firemen.

HUAC strikes a pose as a fireman.

JOE

There's teachers.

HUAC2 strikes a pose as a teacher.

JOE

And then there's Bertolt Breccccht.

JOE mockingly emulates the pose
Brecht is currently doing. Then:

JOE

(To Brecht)

Well, I am not afraid. Not of you.

Joe walks over to HUAC.

JOE

(To HUAC, re: Brecht)

Mark him down as one of them.

HUAC

One of who?

JOE

Them.

Joe walks over to his table and
pours himself a glass of water,
satisfied that he's won.

JOE

(To Brecht)

Thank you for your testimony today, Mr. Breccccht. Good of
you to come.

Long Pause. Brecht seems defeated.

BRECHT

Good of me to come? You act like I had a choice? I didn't
want to be here. I didn't want to testify. You made me. The
best that I could do was not name names...

JOE

We got one name though, didn't we.

(To HUAC)

Albert Einstein. Find him for me.

BRECHT

Not name names and not tell you what you desperately wanted to hear.

JOE

You didn't have to tell us. We got the information anyway.

BRECHT

DISinformation.

JOE

It's the only information people will know about you from here on out. You're a Communist Nazi!

BRECHT

People won't believe it. I won't let them!

JOE

Oh? Between the two, who are they going to believe? Someone who writes fiction all day... or the United States Government? I'm not concerned. They won't even hear you. We have a pretty big megaphone over here so I'm not too worried about what you might say. Your little farces are no threat to us.

(Then, in Brecht's ear)

But we'll collect them all anyway and burn them for good measure.

BRECHT

Of course you will. You stand there mocking me and mocking theater, saying you're not afraid, but you'll burn my words.

Brecht removes the current placard that reads: *Brecht is on the ropes*. He hands it to Joe.

BRECHT

Here. You can start with these.

The new sign on the easel now reads: *Brecht has a comeback*.

BRECHT

The fact is if you're really not afraid, if that's really true... why did you make me come here?

JOE

You're here because I wanted you to be here.

BRECHT

No. I'm here because you are afraid. Of me. You're scared of my words. Hell, you're afraid of words in general. Words like communist and Marxist and socialist. You don't even know what they mean, but you're scared of them. Is that why you peddle fear so much? Because you have so much of it.

You peddle it hoping to convince others to be afraid, too. All the while, I'm succeeding at convincing them not to be.

That's why I'm here. That's why you're scared of me. Because I am showing people there's no reason to be afraid. There is reason, however, to be angry. And the people are listening.

JOE

No one is listening.

BRECHT

They are listening. They listen to us because we know the future. How?

He points to the easel and placards.

BRECHT

We see the signs.

JOE

No one is listening!

BRECHT

They listened to Clifford Odets, didn't they.

JOE

(To HUAC)

Put Clifford Odets on the list.

BRECHT

And Molière before him.

JOE

(To HUAC)

Put Molière on the list.

BRECHT

And even Aristophanes before them.

JOE

(To HUAC)

Put Aristophanes on the list! Find all their books! Burn them all!

BRECHT

You talk about the fecklessness of theater, nothing to be afraid of, yet your actions betray you. For if you truly weren't afraid, if we weren't getting to you, if we weren't making an impact, why spend so much time...

Banning us
Detaining us
Excommunicating us

Arresting us
Deporting us
You're certainly not supporting us

It makes no sense
If it's true
That we are not a threat to you

The only rational conclusion
One can make from your obtrusion
Time and time and time again
You're scared you're time is at an end

And you're right to be! Your hand is played!
Because we know now you're Afraid!

So while we haven't won the war
While there's still much work to do
I take solace in the fact we put the fear of God in you.

It rhymes so you know it's true
Our words, our words, they frighten you.
(To the audience)

So absurd
To be scared of a word
Don't you agree
Yet look how scared they seem to be
What jokes they are, what a laugh
They're scared I might say words such as

Communism
Marxism
Socialism
Progressivism

(MORE)

BRECHT (CONT'D)

Liberalism
Antifascism
Black Lives Matter
Critical Race Theory
Global Warming
Pro Choice
Representation
Happy Fucking Holidays
Change
Change
Change
Change
Cha-

BANG! Joe has taken out a gun and shot Brecht in the chest. He clutches his chest.

JOE

Oh did you not see that coming? I thought you saw the future. You must have forgotten to flip your sign.

Brecht stumbles over to the easel and with a now bloody hand removes the current placard revealing the final one. Smearred with blood, it reads: *Brecht gets murdered.*

JOE

You don't look so good, Mr. Brecht.

BRECHT

(Labored breathing)

It's Mr. Brecht (pronounced Bresht).

(To the audience, dying)

And I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. Please don't worry about me. By tomorrow night, I'll be right as rain.

JOE

By tomorrow night you'll be in the ground.

BRECHT

(Dying, to the audience)

Don't be scared. Don't be scared.

JOE

They won't even remember who you are.

BRECHT

(Dying, to the audience)

And don't listen to him. Listen to me. Hear me.
hear...
my...
words...

Brecht dies frozen in a final,
morbid and sad pose.

Joe turns to HUAC and HUAC2.

JOE

(More than a hint of glee)

This is a pity, isn't it? So Horrible. Him dead over there.
Now the audience is probably going to empathize with him...
Which is going to destroy their critical capacity. They're
going to be in such a fog they're probably going to forget
everything he just said. How dreadful.

HUAC and HUAC2 exit.

Joe turns and heads to the exit,
turning to the audience one last
time before he leaves.

JOE

(To the audience)

What a tragedy... this has turned out to be.

He exits.

The lights slowly fade to black.

The end.