

Whither Dialectical Theatre? Confronting Nazism Then and Now

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In November 2011, the discovery of a Neo-Nazi terrorist cell called the National Socialist Underground (NSU) caused uproar in Germany. The group has been accused of several murders, including those of nine Turks, a Greek and a German policewoman, bomb attacks and a series of bank robberies. While the crimes themselves are horrifying, it is the complex that surrounds them that has raised questions not only about rightwing extremism, but the ways in which it has been treated by the German authorities. The group and its associates were known to and monitored by several law-enforcement agencies, yet soon after the cell's discovery, several thousand pages of secret files were systematically shredded at the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Cologne. Complicity, negligence and incompetence have accompanied the increasingly unbelievable turn of events. The media has also played a major role in (mis)reporting and commenting on the murders and the investigations that followed them.

German theatre has not been slow to engage with the issues raised by the NSU in the 2013-14 season: there are at least five major productions in the repertoire, with more in preparation. The range of responses in writing and staging points to a concerted attempt to approach mindsets, rather than minds, and to view the many figures in the crimes and the scandals as parts of a multifaceted system of often contradictory beliefs and actions, rather than as sovereign individuals. The NSU has presented theatre-makers with a series of interconnected relationships that offer themselves as fecund material for dialectical analysis, something that may remind us of an earlier attempt to approach similar subject matter, Brecht's *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938).

I will thus be offering a brief examination of Brecht's dramaturgy and its contexts before considering examples of the new writing and performance that have arisen out of the NSU's activities and their aftermath. My aim is to contrast a Brechtian dialectical approach to a set of political attitudes and behaviours with new formal strategies aimed at confronting the interplay of Nazism and contemporary German democratic society. While the NSU will form the thematic basis of the investigation, my interest lies more in the ways in which practitioners can engage dialectically with contentious social and political phenomena and what kinds of post-Brechtian theatre might emerge from the encounter.