

Using a dance historian's approach as a guiding concept in stage direction

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Abstract

Stage directors see in theatrical texts a basis for developing a personal or contemporary point of view that will lead to a novel production, ideally one that will appeal to today's audiences. Dance historians on the other hand seek to understand and reveal the point of view of dancers and choreographers long gone, and insofar as possible to recover the contexts of works created by others. These different approaches may be reconciled if the stage director can accept an historically informed approach as a valid point of departure, one that is true to the essence of the work in question.

Introduction

This is not so much a research paper as a polemic, written in delayed response to a stage director I once worked with, who, at our first production meeting, announced "I don't do archeology!" I offer it in the hope that it may lead to useful conversations between dance historians and stage directors.

Eilif's dance

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* is set during the Thirty Years' War. In scene two, there's a saber dance for Courage's son Eilif.¹ I'd like to suggest three possible approaches that we might take in choreographing Eilif's dance.

One approach would be to seek sources on dance and swordplay in Sweden and Poland ca. 1625, and base our choreography on them. If such sources prove too scarce, we might decide to look farther afield, to sources from Germany, France, Italy, England, and other regions of Europe. We might try to extrapolate from earlier or later sources; in a pinch, we could use passages from Arbeau's "Bouffons." We'd need to find suitable music, something Swedish or Polish if possible, otherwise perhaps a German galliard or secular song, or one of the many Italian pieces titled "la Battaglia," or perhaps something adapted from one of Monteverdi's madrigali guerrieri. We would of course see to it that Eilif had a proper costume for the period, and a sword of the right size, shape, and weight.

A second approach would be to forget history and focus on the present, seeking to make Brecht's epic relevant to today's audiences. Perhaps we could re-imagine Eilif as an inner-city youth swept up in a thirty-year conflict between rival gangs. He should probably have a gun instead of a sword, with his dance in hip-hop style to an aggressive rap number.

Either of these approaches is plausible, and either could lead to an engaging production, provided that the director and designers are in agreement with our concept for the piece. Audiences might enjoy either treatment: a hyper-accurate presentation of war in the

seventeenth century, or a metaphoric saga of survival in an age of gang violence and turf battles.

A third possible approach would be to attempt to make Eilif's dance as Brecht envisioned it, or as audiences saw it originally, or both; that is, to attempt a reconstruction, or at any rate a "historically informed" choreography. Such an approach is familiar from the realms of early music and early dance.²

Perhaps we would employ this approach for intellectual reasons or out of historical interest, seeking to learn how Brecht's ideas functioned in practice, or hoping to understand what his audiences valued, just as we might visit a museum to study Rubens's approach to narrative, or the effect of the Thirty Years' War on his subject matter. But we might well choose a historically informed approach for aesthetic reasons, believing in the artistic value—for us and for audiences, today—of presenting Brecht's play as he conceived it. We might even feel that this would be the way to experience it at its richest and most nuanced, and therefore at its most moving.³

Terminology—part I

I've outlined three possible approaches to Eilif's dance. The first aims for historical accuracy within the imagined timeframe of the play itself: since the play is set in the seventeenth century, the characters in it should dress, act, and dance in seventeenth-century manner. Let us call this the "archeological" approach.

The archeological approach to staging is a product of the nineteenth century. Stephen Orgel describes Charles Kemble's 1823 production of *King John* as "an originary moment for stage archeology."⁴ Kemble's designer used historical images—tomb effigies, seals, manuscript illumination—to ensure that each character would "appear in the precise habit of the period [that is, ca. 1200], the whole of the dresses and decorations being executed from indisputable authorities."⁵

The second approach avoids or displaces history, seeking to convey the essential story and meaning of the play in a staging adapted to contemporary tastes and circumstances. Let us call this the "unconstrained" approach. Of course there are always constraints: practical constraints of money, time, and energy; and less tangible constraints, for example of ego and experience. And the decisions involved in developing the piece will impose constraints—will, in fact, be decisions to choose one set of constraints over others. Still, in the initial phase this approach may offer moments when, as Peter Brook describes it, "all questions of style and convention explode."⁶

The third approach, for which I've already introduced the term "historically informed," attempts to recapture, insofar as possible, both the essence of the piece and its performance details as they might have been presented to earlier audiences. This is the approach that actor and stage director William Poel advocated and attempted to put into practice with his 1893 *Measure for Measure* and other productions.⁷ Poel criticized both the archeological approach and the unconstrained approach.⁸ He sought to "[revive] the masterpieces of the Elizabethan drama upon the stage for which they were written, so as to represent them as nearly as possible under the conditions existing at the time of their first production . . ."⁹

Notice that the historically informed approach says nothing about how history is to be represented within the piece. It is concerned with how the piece itself fits into history: how

it was presented, and where, and why. It is important to distinguish between a historically informed approach and an archeological approach.

Let me offer an example to illustrate the difference. Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* is set in and around Carthage just after the fall of Troy. An archeological approach might involve research on clothing, sailing vessels, and hunting paraphernalia in ancient Troy and Carthage; a historically informed approach, on the other hand, would consider only how these might have been represented onstage in some earlier production, say at the end of the seventeenth century.

The three approaches I've outlined are not mutually exclusive. They deal with different aspects of a production: its internal representation of history; the concept or vision that guides choices about how it is presented; and relevant information about, and the context of, earlier productions. Thus we may find that approaches overlap: we might wish to mount a historically informed reconstruction of either an archeological production—say, Charles Kemble's *King John*—or an unconstrained production—say, Davenant's *Macbeth*, an operatic adaptation that included singing and dancing, as well as flying witches.¹⁰ An unconstrained production might employ a sort of pseudo-archeological approach, providing imaginary details about an earlier era, or a post-modern/archeological approach, mixing historical details from different eras.

On occasion, we also see productions that purport to be historically informed, but that through overactive stage direction teeter precariously toward unconstrained.

Drawbacks to an archeological approach

There are clear drawbacks to using an archeological approach, especially for a play like *King Lear* that has no fixed historical setting, or for pieces that are set in nonexistent or imagined locations like Bohemia-by-the-sea or Prospero's island. For a piece with set music (an opera or ballet, for example), an archeological approach will always be problematic if the music is from a different period than that of the work's historical setting. And there are likely to be problems that stem from the text as well: *Twelfth Night* is set in Illyria, yet Sir Andrew and Sir Toby talk boisterously of popular sixteenth-century English dances: galliards, corantos, jigs, and so on.

In some cases, an archeological approach—an attempt to show history “as it really was,” rather than as it was written in the piece—might be sufficiently problematic, or appear sufficiently arbitrary, to qualify as unconstrained.

Terminology—part II

Let me briefly mention a few other terms that are sometimes used in connection with approaches to staging or designing a production.

“Traditional” refers to performance practices that have supposedly been handed down unaltered from one generation to another; in a sense, traditional is the opposite of historically informed.

(In the fields of early music and early dance, and in the staging of baroque opera, we seem to have entered a period in which historically informed practice is increasingly treated as traditional: followers of earlier practitioners and researchers continue, and seek to maintain, practices put in place by their predecessors.¹¹)

“Authentic” is sometimes used with roughly the same meaning as “historically informed,” but it has disadvantages. On the one hand, it is readily dismissed as conceptually impossible.¹² On the other hand, “authenticity” is sometimes used in relation to an unconstrained approach, the goal of which is to uncover a work’s essentials.¹³

“Museum piece” has clear negative connotations, and might refer to an archeological, historically informed, or traditional production.¹⁴

The German term “Regietheater” refers to director-centered or concept-driven productions; that is, to a particular sort of unconstrained production. The inner-city *Mother Courage* I outlined earlier might be an example of regietheater, as would Jonathan Miller’s Mafia version of *Rigoletto* or Peter Sellars’s *Così fan Tutte* set in a roadside diner.¹⁵ “Euro-trash” is sometimes used, disparagingly, to mean approximately the same thing as regietheater.¹⁶

Brecht’s Models

Let us return to Eilif’s dance, for which I have outlined three possible approaches: archeological (applying research on early-seventeenth-century dance and swordplay); unconstrained (displacing the setting to a contemporary urban environment); and historically informed (seeking to choreograph and present the dance according to Brecht’s ideas and wishes). With the collective wisdom of SDHS at our disposal, we could certainly manage either the archeological or the unconstrained approach. Would a historically informed approach also be feasible? Would it be appropriate? The answer to both questions is yes.

Brecht provided extensive documentation about his productions of *Mother Courage* (Berlin, 1949, and Munich, 1950). In addition to the playscript (which Brecht had reworked following the 1941 Zurich production), Brecht prepared a separate volume of notes that included comments on general aspects of the production, scene-by-scene summaries of essential elements, and details or observations about specific characters or moments in the action. He also published a volume of photographs from these productions, showing stage groupings, scenic elements, and short sequences.¹⁷

The three volumes—script, notes, and photographs—comprise what Brecht refers to as a “model” for the play. The model was to be used, not as an exact blueprint, but as a starting point for a fully realized production. In his introduction to the model, Brecht explains “In studying what follows—a number of explanations and discoveries emerging from the rehearsal of a play—what matters is that seeing how certain problems are solved should lead one to see the problems themselves.”¹⁸

In his sets and costumes, Brecht paid attention to a general historical framework,¹⁹ but he did not favor an archeological approach. He writes, “The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one, so that it can always be recognised as illusion.”²⁰ Theatrical designer Wolfgang Roth reports that Brecht at one point told him “Learn from History, but at the right moment throw it away. Don’t be hindered by historical accuracy.”²¹

Neither did Brecht favor an unconstrained approach. On the contrary, he believed that constraints such as those given in his models were an aid to creativity. Furthermore, he pointed out, “the free artists of the theatre are not in fact particularly free when you look closer. They are usually the last to be able to rid themselves of hundred-year old prejudices, conventions, complexes. Above all they are quite ignominiously dependent on

‘their’ public. They have to ‘hold its attention’; to ‘grip’ it at all costs”²²

Sources for Eilif’s dance

Eilif’s dance is performed in conjunction with a song that he sings, the “Song of the Wise Woman and the Soldiers.”²³ The song text appeared in Brecht’s first collection of poems, *Die Hauspostille* (1927);²⁴ in *Mother Courage* it was set to music by Paul Dessau.²⁵ The stage direction preceding the song reads “He sings it, dancing a war dance with his sabre.”²⁶

The *Courage* model offers this description of Eilif’s dance:

The brave son’s short sword dance must be executed with passion as well as ease. The young man is imitating a dance he has seen somewhere. It is not easy to make such things evident.²⁷

The model also includes five photographs showing the dance, one within the context of the scene and four more in closeup showing just Eilif.

Thus for Eilif’s dance we have roughly the same sort of information as we might have—or might wish we had—for dances in a play by Shakespeare or an opera by Lully: a brief description; a few images; a playscript or livret, possibly with stage directions; a cast list; and a general understanding of the dates, places, and circumstances of early performances. We have enough to be able to attempt a credible, historically informed version of Eilif’s dance.

The dance should not involve any recognizable material from Arbeau or other sixteenth- or seventeenth-century sources. It’s unlikely that either Brecht or the actor playing Eilif (Ernst Kahler in the photos, almost certainly) would have been familiar with renaissance dance or swordplay sources, so to use them would be to indulge in a sort of inverted anachronism. On the evidence of the photographs, neither should the dance be at all balletic.

What we notice especially in the photos is the energy in Eilif’s movements as he wields the sword, squats, or (apparently) runs in place, and the expression in his face. What is it: ferocity? Or maybe just desperation and fatigue? (Eilif has recently tricked and then butchered a group of peasants.)

There are two other potential sources for Eilif’s dance: eyewitnesses, and film or video. Just possibly, we might be able to find someone still alive who saw the dance in rehearsal or in performance, and who remembers it well enough to offer us a description or even show us some steps. And there is in fact a film of *Mother Courage*, released in 1961, with many of the same actors as in the original 1949 Berlin Ensemble production, and with Ekkehard Schall in the role of Eilif.²⁸ But remember that Brecht did not wish the model to be a blueprint.²⁹ This may explain why he did not include any film or audio recording as part of his models, whether for *Mother Courage* or for other productions. We might be closer to Brecht’s wishes, and to a historically informed production, if we choreographed the dance anew on the basis of Brecht’s model, rather than merely reproducing Ekkehard Schall’s dance from the film.

A suggestion for rapprochement between the unconstrained and the historically informed approaches

Brecht spoke in favor of models and the constraints they impose, but many directors today prefer an unconstrained approach. For some directors, even stage directions are too constraining.³⁰ In his book *Mis-Directing the Play*, Terry McCabe puts it succinctly: “Directors have been trained to think of a production as being about the director’s vision.”³¹

Praising Peter Brook’s 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, McCabe writes, “the point is that inheritance is not as interesting as discovery.”³² Which is fine, and true; but can *rediscovery* also be interesting?

Paradoxically, an unconstrained approach imposes constraints: it obliges the audience to focus on some aspects of the work and neglect, or even forcibly deny, others. If it occurs to a director that Courage’s plight is not unlike that of some inner-city mothers today, the same thought would probably occur to audience members viewing a production based on Brecht’s model. The model allows audiences the freedom to make their own comparisons and to pass their own judgements on Mother Courage and on society. It also allows audiences to think of the play not only in relation to their own lives, but also in relation to its original audience’s lives.

In response to a question about the possible danger that a model might lead to routinization, with the resultant performance merely a copy, Brecht responded, “We must realize that copying is not so despicable as people think. It isn’t ‘the easy way out’. It is no disgrace, but an art. Or rather it needs to be developed into an art, to the point where there is no question of routine and rigidity.”³³ Elsewhere, Brecht said that models “are intended not to render thought unnecessary but to provoke it: not as a substitute for artistic creation but as its stimulus.”³⁴

I would suggest that sources for a historically informed approach—dance notations, musical scores, set designs, prompt books, cast lists, treatises, and other written and visual material—can together form a sort of model for a production, that can be used in the same manner, and for the same reasons, as Brecht’s models. Like them, the historically informed approach allows us a triple point of view: the timeframe and setting of the story itself, be it in Illyria, or Athens, or seventeenth-century Poland; the timeframe and setting of the original production, with the original audience’s own history and experience, whether in London, at Versailles, or in Berlin after a brutal and dehumanizing war; and the time, place, and background of the present performers and audience.

And I would like to propose some sleight of hand. If stage directors are reluctant to relinquish an unconstrained approach for a given piece, they have only to decide that their vision for a piece, their concept, and the idea that will most surprise and impress audiences, is to take a historically informed approach,³⁵ and to use the historically informed model to channel their creativity. Dance historians, meanwhile, can assure them that we don’t do archeology, either.

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Notes

1. This dance did not appear in the first version of the play, used for the 1941 production. The dance first appears in the 1946 revised version.
2. I'm stretching the terminology a bit for the sake of argument; "revival" might be the more usual term for a play that was first presented within living memory.
3. For an eloquent exposition of this argument, see Kelly, *Early Music*, especially Chapter 1.
4. Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 53.
5. Playbill for Kemble's 1823 *King John*, quoted in Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare*, 53.
6. Brook, *The Open Door*, 74.
7. Poel's 1881 *Hamlet* was concerned with text reform only. The results were uneven. See Moore, "William Poel," especially 22–27.
8. Archeological: "When the poet-dramatist demanded that his actors should hold the mirror up to Nature, it was not the nature of the Greeks, nor of the Romans, nor of the early Britons that he meant. The spirit of the Italian Renaissance, with its humanism and intellectuality, had taken too strong a hold upon the imagination of Englishmen to allow of their playgoers being interested in the puppets of a bygone age. Shakespeare had no need to look beyond his own time to find his Lady Macbeth." Unconstrained: "Why should a Shakespeare, whose cunning hand divined the dramatic sequence of his story, have it improved by a modern playwright or actor-manager? The answer will be: Because the modern experts are familiar with theatrical effects of a kind Shakespeare never lived to see. But if a modern rearrangement of Shakespeare's plays is necessary to suit these theatrical effects, the question may well be discussed as to whether rearrangements with all their modern advantages are of more dramatic value than the perfect work of the master." Poel, *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, 63, 119.
9. Poel, *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, 203–204.
10. Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus*, 33 and 209–210. For more on the songs and dances, see Stern, *Documents of performance*, 139, 149, and 151–152.
11. "[I]n earlier decades early-music performers prided themselves on discovering personally how early music worked. . . . The age of common exploration, however, is giving way to a system of teachers and students, the very system that was partly a cause of the early-music movement at its beginning." Kelly, *Early Music*, 114.
12. "Can we mount an authentic performance as Shakespeare would have seen it? No. Authenticity in the performing arts is ultimately impossible." Hall, *Shakespeare's Advice to the Players*, 10. (Hall then goes on to outline what I would consider a historically informed approach to delivering Shakespeare's texts.)
13. For example, we read of Stanislavsky's "search for theatre work with meaning and authenticity." Jones, *Great Directors*, 32.
14. Mark Bly, at the time the Dramaturg/Literary Manager of The Guthrie Theater, in an interview by David Moore, Jr.: "I would define 'archaeological production' as some naive attempt to recreate the way a play was originally staged. This leads to 'museum productions.' We do not encourage such work at the Guthrie." Note the confusion between archeological and historically informed. A bit later in the interview, Bly says "We must . . . stage classics so they're not mere museum pieces, but have meaning and immediacy for our audiences here and now." Cardullo, *What is dramaturgy?* 109 and 116.
15. These were unlike, e.g., *West Side Story*, which though based on *Romeo and Juliet* made no pretense of being a radical restaging of the work itself.
16. See, for example, "Taking Out The (Euro)Trash," in the online blog *Questa Voce*.
17. Brecht, *Couragemodell*. For a detailed inventory, see Jones, *Great Directors*, 78. Ruth Berlau took many of the photos and helped Brecht assemble the model. In a June 4, 1951 journal entry, Brecht wrote, "Working on Ruth's Model book is a grind, but it has to be done if only to show how many things have to be taken into account for a production." Willett, *Mother Courage*, 91. For a performance history, see Willett, *Mother Courage*, xxii.

18. Willett, *Brecht on theatre*, 216. "Bei dem Studium des Folgenden, einer Anzahl von Erörterungen und Erfindungen beim Proben eines Stücks, sollte man angesichts gewisser Lösungen von Problemen hauptsächlich der Probleme ansichtig werden." Brecht, *Couragemodell*, 2: 6.
19. He writes that the sets for *Mother Courage* were made of "such materials as one would expect to find in the military encampments of the seventeenth century: tenting, wooden posts lashed together with ropes, etc." Willett, *Mother Courage*, 93. "...die Materialien der Kriegslager des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts: Zeltleinwand, mit Stricken zusammengehaltene Holzbalken usw." Brecht, *Couragemodell*, 2: 7.
20. Willett, *Mother Courage*, 95. "Die Illusion des Theaters muß eine teilweise sein, so daß sie immer als Illusion erkannt werden kann." Brecht, *Couragemodell*, 2: 8.
21. Roth, "Working with Bertolt Brecht," 134.
22. Willett, *Brecht on theatre*, "Does Use of the Model Restrict the Artist's Freedom?" (a dialogue with E. A. Winds), 223.
23. "Das Lied vom Weib und dem Soldaten."
24. Willett, *Mother Courage*, 141; see also <http://www.antiwarsongs.org/>.
25. Evidently based on Hans Eissler's 1928 setting of the text. There is no score included in the *Couragemodell*.
26. "Er singt es, einem Kriegstanz mit dem Säbel tanzend."
27. Willett, *Mother Courage*, 106. "Der kleine wilde Säbeltanz des kühnen Sohns muß sowohl mit Feuer als auch mit Lässigkeit ausgeführt werden. Der junge Mensch ahmt einen Tanz nach, dem er irgendwo gesehen hat. Derlei ist nicht leicht herauszubringen." *Couragemodell*, 2: 20.
28. Atlas Forum, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. Ekkehard Schall (1930–2005) took over the role from Ernst Kahler (1914–1993) in 1952 (or possibly 1951).
29. Brecht wrote, "Such things as the cook's makeup or Mother Courage's costume should not be imitated. The model should not be used to excess." Willett, *Mother Courage*, 92. "Die Maske des Kochs, die Kleidung der Courage und derlei muß man nicht nachahmen. Man muß das Modell nicht zu sehr pressen." *Couragemodell*, 2: 5.
30. "[When S. J. Perelman and Ogden Nash] pointed out the stage directions already in their script, Kazan answered: 'That chicken shit? I never read that. What do you think my business is in being here? I'm the director; I have to think of the business. I never read that kind of thing!'" Cheryl Crawford, *One Naked Individual: My 50 Years in the Theatre* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), 129, cited in Jones, *Great Directors*, 183 (footnote 117).
31. McCabe, *Mis-directing the Play*, 75.
32. McCabe, *Mis-directing the Play*, 106.
33. Willett, *Brecht on theatre* (dialogue with E. A. Winds), 224.
34. Willett, *Brecht on theatre*, 216. "Sie sind auch nicht gemacht, das Denken zu ersparen, sondern es anzuregen: nicht gemacht, das künstlerische Schaffen zu ersetzen, sondern es zu erzwingen." *Couragemodell*, 2: 5.
35. Or at any rate a modified historically informed approach, since the very idea of having a stage director is counter to historically informed practice for works from before the 19th century.

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