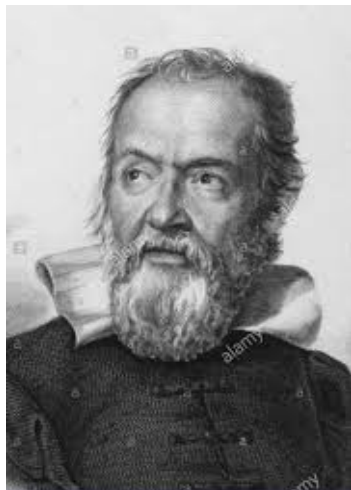


The Thrice-Triple Luck of Bertolt Brecht
Three Escapes, Three Versions of *Galileo* and Three *Mitarbeiterinin*
by Jerry James

Long after the Reign of Terror, when people asked Abbé Sieyès, “What did you do during the Revolution?” he replied, “I survived.”



Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)



Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

On the evening of July 30, 1947, an unusual crowd converged on the 260-seat Coronet Theatre in Hollywood. Charlie Chaplin was there, as were Charles Boyer, Ingrid Bergman, Gene Kelly, Olivia de Havilland, Igor Stravinsky and Frank Lloyd Wright.

The occasion was Charles Laughton’s appearance in *Galileo*, a play by Bertolt Brecht, in an English version by Laughton. The entire pre-Broadway run had sold out in advance. So, what was a Marxist doing in Tinseltown with a play about the man who removed the Earth from the center of God’s universe?

Brecht and Galileo had minor similarities—each played a plucked instrument; each had three illegitimate children—but they shared one major trait: Each saw himself as the sole judge of *Truth*. And each had a weapon to be wielded in the cause of that

Truth—Galileo used the telescope; Brecht, Marxism. But Brecht had one advantage over Galileo—he always knew where the exit was.

On June 21, 1633, the Roman Catholic Church forced Galileo to abjure his writings and recant. He would spend the rest of his life under house arrest. Three hundred years later, on the morning of February 28, 1933, the day after the Reichstag burned, as the Nazis prepared to seize absolute power, Brecht was on a train to Prague.

It was only the first of three major escapes he would make over the next fifteen years.

“In the asphalt city I am at home”

Bertolt Brecht was not a nice man. Kurt Weill called him, “...one of the most repulsive, unpleasant fellows... on this earth.” Brecht wasn’t much to look at,

either, with his workman's clothes (tailor-made), cheap cigars and poor hygiene, but he was apparently crack cocaine to a number of smart, talented women. He would build his career on this, combined with another trait he shared with Galileo: taking credit for the work of others.

In a little over a decade, Brecht went from being the Rimbaud of German poetry and playwriting to being rich, as co-author of *The Threepenny Opera* (1928, music by Weill). Although this might have seemed inconvenient for a Marxist, Brecht probably adopted Marxism, John Fuegi writes, because of its "I am sure I am always rightness." Ergo, it was right for Brecht to have a secret Swiss bank account.



Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann

Brecht's early plays were created with friends. But in 1924, his work changed after he met Elisabeth Hauptmann, his first *mitarbeiterin*. In German, the word might mean "female assistant." To Brecht, it meant girl-of-all-work, sex toy and uncredited co-author. Brecht's wife, the actress Helene Weigel, wasn't pleased, but she had two small children to consider.

So well known was Hauptmann's contribution to Brecht's work that a Berlin cabaret sketch went: "I've been to a play." "Who wrote it?" "Brecht." "Then who wrote it?" (Fuegi)

"The house has four doors to escape by"

By the time he fled Berlin, Brecht had replaced Hauptmann with the younger

Margarete Steffin. From Prague, Brecht joined the half-Jewish Weigel and their children in Vienna. There, a childhood friend offered her asylum in Denmark. With the aid of the money Weigel brought from Vienna, they bought a house and settled in for the next six years. Brecht's Swiss bank account remained secret.

Brecht was soon joined by Steffin, the proletarian writer Brecht would always claim to be. With her, his work would change once again. Over the next few years, Steffin would co-create the first versions of *Mother Courage*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.



Margarete Steffin and Brecht

They began writing *Galileo* late in 1938. Version 1.0 was a thinly-veiled criticism of the Moscow show trials, with Galileo standing in for Nikolai Bukharin, liquidated by Stalin. In this version, the scientist was the unquestioned hero, a lovable rogue.

But in January 1939, Otto Hahn split the atom. That led to Version 1.1, which was revised to state, "[P]hysics itself could become deadly to the human race." (Fuegi) This version would be used in the 1943 Zurich world premiere.

War was coming. Soon, Denmark would no longer be safe. But where to go? Russia was out. In 1935, Brecht had traveled to the USSR, and although he was feted there, he realized, "It was a world where any incorrect word could cost one's life, but there was

never a clear sense as to what the correct word might be.” (Fuegi)

“We went, changing our country more often than our shoes”

In the spring of 1939, using the connections of his new Danish *mitaribeitin*, Ruth Berlau, Brecht arranged first a move to Sweden, then to Finland. By now, with the route across the Atlantic closed, the only way out for the Brecht ménage (including Steffin and Berlau) was to take the Trans-Siberian Railway across the USSR to board a neutral ship for California.



Brecht and Ruth Berlau

With the aid of Elisabeth Hauptmann, now an American citizen, U.S. visas proved easier to get than Soviet travel papers—most of Brecht’s old contacts were dead. But on May 29, passage was suddenly booked on a ship sailing in two weeks.

Margarete Steffin was left behind. She died of tuberculosis in a Moscow hospital five days into Brecht’s railroad journey. His poems written after her death are the closest he ever came to showing grief.

And although no one knew it at the time, there was no time to lose. While Brecht was at sea, the U.S. ordered that no visa was to be issued to anyone with close relatives in Germany. He had escaped a second time, on the last ship.

“The marketplace where lies are bought”

Brecht was immediately taken up by the Hollywood émigré community and given a

small stipend. Director Fritz Lang, another German refugee, hired him to work on *Hangmen Also Die*. The ensuing horrific experience effectively ended Brecht’s Hollywood career.



Brecht and Charles Laughton, 1944

In March 1944, Brecht met Charles Laughton, who felt guilty for being safe while Hitler was bombing England. So, he befriended German émigrés, including Brecht, who could be very charming when he wished. Brecht immediately praised Laughton’s Oscar-winning performance as Henry VIII. And just by chance, he had a play for which Laughton would be perfect!

Shortly thereafter, Brecht had a literal translation of *Galileo* done by a “secretary”—almost certainly Hauptmann.

Over the next few years, Brecht and Laughton met often to hammer out the play. One spoke no German; the other, only a little English, although his sessions with Laughton would improve Brecht’s English immeasurably. But just as Version 2.0 neared completion, the atomic bomb dropped. This required a major revision. *Galileo* would now be condemned not merely as a coward but as a traitor to science.

Version 2.1 would finally go into rehearsal on June 24, 1947. Rehearsals involved much screaming on the part of

Brecht, demanding constant changes in sets, props and costumes. Despite decidedly mixed reviews, Brecht pronounced himself pleased with the production. Now, with the war over, Brecht prepared to return to Europe. But on September 19, he was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).

“If my luck does not hold, I am lost”

On October 30, 1947, Bertolt Brecht appeared before HUAC—wearing a suit and tie. As Brecht took the stand, his English, so improved by his collaboration with Laughton, suddenly became so poor he required an interpreter, which gave him more time to prepare his answers. And although every previous witness had avoided answering the famed question, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party,” Brecht promptly replied, “No,” which was the truth.



Brecht before HUAC, October 30, 1947

Over the course of the next hour, Brecht played the lovable rogue, now telling the truth, now fudging the facts. When HUAC’s counsel read a poem and asked if he had written it, Brecht replied, “No, I wrote a German poem, but that is very different.”

The committee excused him with their thanks, praising him as “a good example.”

Brecht was the eleventh and last witness in this group. The others became known as “The Hollywood Ten.” They went to jail. Brecht went to New York. The next day, travel papers in hand, he flew to Paris. It was his third and final escape.

Galileo opened on Broadway on December 7, 1947. It played only six performances. Brecht blamed its failure on the inability of the audience to think.

“But you, when at last it comes to pass/That man can help his fellow man, Do not judge us/Too harshly.”

Brecht and Weigel returned to a divided Germany on October 22, 1948. In East Berlin, they quickly settled into comfortable positions as co-heads of the Berliner Ensemble. Under Brecht’s complete control, the BE became one of the world’s great theatre companies. Its reputation was built on Weigel’s performances in the plays Brecht and his *mitarbeiterin* had written.

But even as the Communist regime exhibited the BE to the world as a symbol of its ideological superiority, Brecht kept an Austrian passport and his Swiss bank account. There is evidence that he intended to leave money to his *misarbeiterin*, but Weigel, triumphant at last, put the kibosh on that.

And until his final days, Brecht would work on version 3 of *Galileo*, each time condemning him more and more harshly. And each time, Brecht would fail, because audiences refused to buy it.

Carl Jung wrote, “One meets with projections, one does not make them.” From the first version, one can readily see Brecht in *Galileo*, the lovable rogue who stole the telescope as casually as Brecht put his name on the work of his *mitarbeiterin*.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.