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Detachment, Discovery, and Failure: An Analysis of the Process and Production of THE JEWISH WIFE by Bertolt Brecht

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Detachment, Discovery, and Failure:

An Analysis of the Process and Production of *The Jewish Wife* by Bertolt Brecht

A Senior Project Submitted to the Division of Arts of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

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1. Introduction: Why *The Jewish Wife*?

I had difficulty deciding what I wanted to focus on for this project. I wanted to hone in on my acting skills and I wanted to work individually, but that's all I knew. I first thought I might focus on exploring female agency in Shakespeare through Rosalind from *As You Like It* and Juliet from *Romeo & Juliet*. Another idea I had was to work on a section of *Happy Days*, a two act play by Samuel Beckett. I did a theater lab focusing on Beckett at the National Theater Institute last spring where we worked on *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*, and I felt drawn to the character Winnie from the latter play. I also was interested in adapting one of Angela Carter's short stories or a section of *The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson as a stage piece.

None of these ideas ended up panning out. Though I would have inevitably learned greatly from exploring *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*, it wouldn't have been out of my comfort zone since Shakespeare's primarily what I've honed in on as an actor. And though I'm interested in someday adapting the works of Carter and Winterson, I don't feel confidently enough in my writing skills to have focused on adapting a piece and acting in it. And *Happy Days* is a two act play, longer than the aloud 25-minutes. However, because I was partly interested in doing something along the lines of a one woman show my advisor, Jonathan Rosenberg, suggested I look at this one act play by Bertolt Brecht called *The Jewish Wife*. In the end, this is what I chose to work on because, when I read it over a couple of times, I thought the play was well written and that it would be something new and challenging for me to work on as an actor. I had never performed anything by Brecht or anything that closely resembled a one woman show and most of my experience with text has been in verse, so to try something more

contemporary, in prose, and set in a very politically charged time in our recent historical memory was something I thought would be a great learning experience. I have never been captivated by Brecht's writing, and though this play is not written in a typical Brechtian style, I was still not captivated or passionate about this play. I knew this from the beginning and thought it would be an additional challenge to work on a piece I had no fervor for. Everything from working on a piece with little collaboration to working on a text I didn't feel a strong connection to would prove to be more difficult than I thought. Ultimately, I think I failed in this project, but in failing I have had an invaluable learning experience.

2. Fall: The Preparation

This past fall semester was dedicated to independent work on the project. My director, Payton Smith, was studying abroad and I didn't find a stage manager or an actor to play the husband until late November. I spent this time researching prewar Nazi Germany (specifically between the years 1933-1935) to get a better understanding of Judith's given circumstances.

I wanted to figure out specifically when and where this play was taking place because I needed to understand why Judith is choosing now to leave her home. I landed on September 1st, 1935 in Berlin. This made the most sense to me because it was just on the brink of the Nuremberg Laws, which were established on September 15, 1935. Only months earlier, in May of 1935, the Nazi party began openly and forcibly demanding drastic actions should be taken against Jews, and in late July of 1935 rumors began that a law would come out making it illegal

for Jewish and German people to be married. The Nuremberg Laws were “a crucial step in Nazi racial laws that led to the marginalization of German Jews and ultimately to their segregation, confinement, and extermination.”¹ It seemed likely to me that Judith would leave in spite of these rumors and, as Berlin got increasingly dangerous for her (even as a bourgeois woman), it was now or never. Later on in the process, when talking with Payton during table work we also discussed the idea that Judith might’ve (just the night before) seen another bourgeois Jewish woman get accosted publically on the street in a way that made her fear her life enough to leave the next day.

I also spent the fall semester watching old footage on YouTube of Berlin in the 1920’s and 1930’s. I found videos that both focused on the nazi regime and videos that did not. The footage I found most helpful, incidentally, was the footage that showed me people having a good time in Berlin. There were many videos dedicated to showing summers in Berlin; people dancing, swimming, drinking, playing games, laughing, eating, etc. It was helpful to see the style of the time and it was helpful to see what Judith might’ve done for fun in this life she is being forced to leave.

After doing this research I turned my focus to the play. First, I broke the play up into smaller scenes (it ended up being eight scenes in total). Then, I wrote down all of the facts I knew about Judith from the text, all of the implied information I got from the text, and some imagined circumstances respectively.

The facts were the easiest to come by in the text, including:

- She is 36
- She is bourgeois

¹ “The Nuremberg Laws.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/winter/nuremberg.html.

- She smokes
- She plays bridge
- Fritz has been 'cut' at the clinic where he holds the position of chief surgeon
- They live in a large apartment in an urban environment
- She is Jewish

There was also implied information, which held truth in the text but was not outright fact, including:

- She has lived a privileged life
- She has been married to Fritz for over 10 years
- She is surrounded by protestant Germans
- Her and Fritz have been treated differently recently because of the changing political climate
- She has stereotypical Jewish features
- She does not practice Judaism anymore
- She rarely gets along with her sister-in-law, Gertrude

Then, there were the imagine circumstances, including:

- She doesn't have children
- She lives in Berlin, and has her whole life
- She isn't trying to get to Amsterdam, She is trying to get to the United States
- Her parents are dead
- She doesn't have any siblings
- She went to university
- Fritz is six years older than Judith
- It is September 1, 1935
- Most of her social network is through her husband
- She is excellent at bridge

Payton and I flushed out this information during table work this spring, but I wanted to make sure I had a base for us to jump off of when rehearsals started in February.

During the fall I also did a weekend long residency in November at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. They gave me housing, food, and rehearsal space to work on this project. I spent this time working on Judith's imagined circumstances, doing research, and memorizing lines in hopes to be as best prepared as I could be for rehearsals to start in the months to come. While I

was there I met with my friend and fellow actor, Jake Miller, who was in my semester at the National Theater Institute last spring, and I asked him to play the husband. Though he was very eager to help and extremely supportive, ultimately, this ended up making the process more stressful because I needed someone I could have easy access to and Jake lives about two hours away. I understand why I asked Jake to be in the piece, he is a supportive and kind presence, something I felt I really needed in the fall. That being said, I would not make this choice again. I think we would've gone leaps and bounds further than we did if I found someone at Bard, which really couldn't have been that hard if I tried. After I got back to Bard from the O'Neill I asked Sophie Landa, someone who I have worked with on many theater projects throughout my time at Bard and who I trust and respect immensely, to be my stage manager.

Ultimately I spent the fall semester doing research, familiarizing myself with the play, the facts, the given circumstances, and memorizing lines. I was glad I had this time alone with the text, but by the end of December I was ready to get into the rehearsal room with Payton, Sophie, and Jake.

3. Spring: The Process of Discovery

From the beginning Jonathan advised us that, though this play was written by Bertolt Brecht, it was not written with the typically intended Brechtian qualities we normally see in his work. This piece was written more as a psychological drama than a piece of epic theater with

placards, songs, and stylized acting. In his forward to *The Jewish Wife and Other Short Plays* Eric Bentley states,

The short plays in this book have been chosen, not as treatments of a common theme or examples of a common method -- they are neither -- , but for convenience in reading and in producing. Here is Brecht for the bedside table and the community theatre.²

In this vein, we treated *The Jewish Wife* as an exploration of this individual woman's experience; an examination of her psychology, the world she inhabits, and the decisions she makes to navigate her increasingly unfortunate and dangerous circumstances.

We began rehearsal within the first two weeks of this semester. Rehearsals were, at first, not a huge time commitment. Sophie, Payton, and I would meet on Friday's from 11am-1pm in Studio North. Though I had begun familiarizing myself with the facts, implied information, and imagined circumstances, the three of us started out at the table. We further discussed Judith's imagined circumstances, and Sophie, in part, became a dramaturg as well as a stage manager, looking up any historical information when it was needed. Also, Payton brought in a friend of hers (also named Sophie) who is fluent in German, to help us with the German pronunciation of some names, such as "Frau Schoeck" and "Lotta".

First we specified who I was talking to on the phone in scenes two through five, what my relationship was to them, and what they were saying on the other line. Through dissecting all of this, we discovered the phone calls escalated in intimacy. Judith first speaks to the doctor, a man who is regularly her bridge partner. We figured that Judith and Fritz weekly play bridge with the doctor and his wife, Thekla. This phone call, we discovered, was primarily a social obligation

² Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 7.

that Judith felt it would be rude to neglect before leaving. What stood out most to us was Judith's dedication to maintaining her social status, even in these trying times. It makes perfect sense that, though Judith is in fear for her life, she still finds it necessary to preserve her social status as best she can, it has essentially become second nature to her.

After calling the doctor, Judith calls Frau Shoeck. We decided that Frau Shoeck, or Lotta, as Judith also calls her, is the husband of Max Shoeck, a man who has higher status at the clinic Fritz works at and is one of the main instigators in trying to "cut" him. Judith calls Lotta more for Fritz than for herself. This phone call is an attempt to restore his reputation to what it was before this change in political climate. When Judith says, "because they already cut you there to your face"³ we figured she means he has been openly and unapologetically ostracized, shamed, and they have taken away hours and responsibilities from him solely because his wife is Jewish. Though it's likely that Judith and Fritz once had a cordial relationship with the Shoeck's, recently it has been nothing but passive aggressive, awkward, and hostile. While Judith calls the doctor out of courtesy and habit and they hold a polite conversation that barely grazes against the politics of the day (though they both know why she is leaving), Judith's conversation with Lotta is humiliating for her and purely to restore her husband's status after she is gone.

Judith's third call is to Fritz's sister, Gertrude. From this phone call we thought it seemed pretty evident that Judith and Gertrude have never truly gotten along and perhaps Gertrude has always resented the fact that her brother married a Jewish woman. Though this phone call is more emotionally charged, more intimate, and more honest than the phone call with Lotta, it has a similar purpose; this is her attempt to secure a caretaker for Fritz when she is gone. This phone

³ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 15.

call is also more embarrassing than the one to Lotta, and without outright saying any of it, she is admitting defeat to Gertrude. Judith has taken care of Fritz for over a decade and knows how to take care of him better than he knows how to take care of himself and she feels as though she should pass along this information to another female figure in his life until he can find himself another wife to take care of him.

Lastly, Judith calls Anna. Her conversation with Anna is the most honest and the most intimate. We discovered that Anna is the only connection Judith has that is not through her husband. It seemed likely that Anna and Judith have been close friends for over a decade. From the conversation, we gathered that Judith confided in Anna about her desire to leave before the play begins. Though this phone call is for herself and Anna and the friendship they share, a small part of it still holds stake in securing her husband's life after she leaves, she says, "I want you to be good to him a little at first....Yes, especially on Sunday's, and advise him to move.... The apartment is too big for him."⁴ We get the sense that Anna is more critical of Fritz. She is honest with her friend and speaks the truth that Judith doesn't want to hear. Judith replies to Anna, "He was *not* different, on the contrary."⁵ Though later, when she's rehearsing her speech to Fritz she says, "Don't say you're not changed. You are."⁶ Anna is the only one Judith has confided in about her desires to leave, she's the only one she's spoken openly with about the danger she is in, and though Anna is not Jewish herself, Anna is Judith's only ally in a society that increasingly holds Judith as an unworthy and contemptible individual.

The time we spent discovering the other characters that inhabit this play through the phone calls and Judith in relation to them was a valuable part to the process. After a few weeks

⁴ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 13.

⁵ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 13.

⁶ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 14.

of table work we got up on our feet to work on the phone calls and the monologue before the scene at the end (we did not get to rehearse with Jake until a weekend in late March). We had minimal props; a cigarette, ashtray, and rotary phone so I could practice with these objects that were very foreign to me. I think, partly because we spent too much time intellectualizing the circumstances at the table, partly because I felt detached from this project essentially from the beginning, and partly because I simply had a difficult time understanding this character, I was very in my head when we got up to work. I found it more challenging than I ever have to get into the emotional and physical space of this character. I didn't know what I needed in order move passed this, neither did Payton or Sophie and the default for rehearsals became a spiral of frustration which would lead to me pushing through the monologue and then crying afterwards for failing and not knowing how not to fail anymore. Improvisation and imaginative dreaming worked to a certain extent, but in some ways also kept me in my head. When Jake came for the weekend in late March to work the end of the play, it was helpful in clarifying our relationship in many ways, however, I think we failed to explore the marriage and the journey these characters go on with nearly enough depth. And Judith's personal journey is still viscerally unclear to me, and I believe I failed in understanding her as a character on stage with any complexities.

During the last two weeks of the process we were fortunate enough to get access to props and furniture from the Fisher Center storage (thanks to Hellena) and costumes from the costume department at Shakespeare & Company. Also, I conveniently had a couple of pillbox hats and some passable clothing pieces I got from home. When we got into the Old Gym for tech week Nina and I were both able to run our pieces through every night with lights (thanks to Janine). It was fortunate that Nina and I both had minimal lights and sound in our shows so we were able to

focus on making our stories and performances as clear as we could in preparation for an audience.

4. Analysis of Judith Keith

Brecht was successful in writing a character who is complex, realistic, and held the breadth and depth of her time and given circumstances. This was one of many challenges I encountered in this piece. It was hard for me to imagine being a thirty-six year old woman who is being forced from her homeland, ostracized by her friends, neglected by her husband, and discriminated against for her heritage, culture, appearance, and belief system. And as a result, probably for the first time, she assuming agency out of fear for her life.

One of her qualities which gives the play complexity, is the fact that Judith is a privileged character in a very disadvantageous situation. Her primary concerns, for most of her life, have been in reputation, status, and wealth. She has dedicated her whole life to cultivating an esteemed social reputation for her and her husband. In his forward, Eric Bentley gives us his opinion on how an actress should play Judith:

And the actresses who play the Jewish wife exclusively for pathos have failed to notice that this woman is asking: “Why is this happening to *me*-- I always went along? Her fate is neither tragic nor purely pathetic: it is ironic, grotesque, almost ridiculous, and therefore only one step from the funny...”⁷

⁷ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 7.

Though I do believe this play is tragic, I also think there is truth in Bentley's statement. Judith is more or less most concerned with why this is happening to her specifically. In rehearsing her speech to her husband she says,

I've never meddled in politics. Was I for Thaelmann? No, I am thoroughly Bourgeois, a housewife with servants and so forth, and now suddenly blondes can only do this sort of thing. I've often thought lately how you said years ago: "There are valuable people and less valuable people. The valuable people get insulin when they have sugar and the less valuable people don't." I agreed with you. Well, now they've made new categories of this sort, and I belong to the less valuable. It serves me right.⁸

She is both asking why is this happening to the larger Jewish population and asking why is this happening to her as a bourgeois woman. We spent a lot of time in the rehearsal room discussing Judith's self-image and how it's tragically altering because of the political climate. Without children, or parents who are still alive, Judith's whole world has been her husband and the social circles they inhabit. Likewise, we discussed the probability that these social circles are completely through her husband; the people he works with, who they attend dinner parties with, play bridge with, go to church with. Fritz brought her into a world where she is a minority and, though she has been widely accepted in these circles in the past, their opinions of her have started to change with the Nazi regime. It's not just that they become afraid to be seen with her, but embarrassed because, the idea that she is lesser, unworthy, and contemptible because she is Jewish has infiltrated their larger social consciousness.

It seems likely that, through their ten or so years of marriage, Judith and Fritz were, at least at first, happily in love and the reason this has changed in the past few years is because German society now views Judith as, not only lesser, but completely unworthy of life. We

⁸ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 14.

discussed the possibility that there might have been tensions in the past; it's probable that the couple has had to deal with infertility or the loss of a child in some way and Judith has faced antisemitism from Fritz's world, Gertrude for example, probably has always been passive aggressively unhappy that her brother married a Jewish woman. But all in all they have been able to overcome the difficulties they have faced and have lived a content life together within the social stratosphere they occupy. However, over the past few years, and more dramatically, the past few months Judith and Fritz have become different people. The politics of Germany in 1935; the increasing outward danger and hatred towards Jews and this taking place right on the cusp of the Nuremberg Laws, has changed them both within their relationship and as individuals. Judith is devastated to give up her status, her privilege, and the life she has meticulously cultivated for herself in Berlin, but her options now are slim. Either, she can hold on to this life for as long as possible until all of her dignity is gone, her husband tells her to leave, and/or she is killed. Or she can leave with what dignity she has left in hopes that she restores her husband's dignity with her absence, and with determination to cultivate another life for herself somewhere safer. She is angry, disappointed, and heartbroken by Fritz, who has been increasingly exhibiting signs that, though he is not a Nazi, is proud to be German now than ever. In her pretend speech to her husband, Judith says:

Don't say you're not changed. You are! Last week you found -- "quite objectively" -- that the percentage of Jewish scientists is after all not so great. It always begins with objectivity. And why are you always telling me I was "never such a nationalist as today."⁹

⁹ Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965. Page 14.

Fritz will never admit that he has changed with the political climate that is imploring him to see his wife as shameful and contemptible; the type of person who doesn't get insulin when she eats sugar.

Judith is a complex character. Her tragedy lies in circumstances out of her control and in the shattering of her self-perception. She has always thought of herself as a "valuable" person, but because she is being forced out of her homeland, ostracized by her society, her friends, and her husband, her view of herself is altering. She knows that what is happening is ridiculous, cruel, and unprecedented, but because she is now being treated so differently by her friends and her husband, she looks inward at herself and asks why? She begins to question who she is and what she deserves. And though she is assuming agency in leaving her husband in order to save her life, I believe that she ultimately wishes for him to offer to come with her, though she knows this is unrealistic. The best scenario for Judith is for her to reach her destination (we discussed the likelihood that, though she is telling everyone she is going to Amsterdam, in actuality she is trying to make it to the United States), and to meet another upper-middle class man who can take of her and give her a lifestyle she is used to. The worst scenario, and tragically the more likely one, is death.

5. Reflection: Learning From Failure

Having completed this process, I'm able to look at it from a distance and undeniably say I have failed in nearly every possible way. Over the course of this process I became increasingly resentful towards this piece and I was never able to get passed the resentment to explore the play

to my fullest ability. I failed my director and stage manager by bringing frustration into the rehearsal room, and I failed in choosing a scene partner who was unavailable to me. I understand why I made these decisions and why I was unable to bring myself out of my frustration and into the work, and I believe this project will serve as an invaluable lesson as I go out into the professional world.

My first mistake was choosing to do *The Jewish Wife* by Bertolt Brecht, a play and playwright I do not feel connected to or passionate about in any way. I'm not saying I regret discarding the former ideas I mentioned in the first section of this paper, I more so regret not taking the time to read more plays, more books, more poetry, with the intention to find something that strongly resonated with me. Theater is exciting and fun and fulfilling, but only if I care deeply about what I'm working on. I chose *The Jewish Wife* because I wanted to hone my acting skills and I thought it was a well written piece of theater. Now I know that these are not good enough reasons for me to pick a piece by my own volition. These are, obviously, hard feelings for me to navigate because I'm inevitably going to have to work on pieces I don't feel passionately about in the future. I'm more aware now that, as an actor, I will have to find ways into characters and stories I don't feel a connection to. I still don't know exactly how to do that, but at least I know how crucial it is for me to figure it out. That being said, idealistically I'd hope I wouldn't get cast as Judith in *The Jewish Wife*, but rather someone who feels passionately about the character and the play would.

I also believe there are many ways in which I failed once we got into the rehearsal room. I don't mean I tried something and I failed and as a result we discovered more about the character and the story through trial and error. I mean I failed in talking too much about the play

instead of doing, I failed in not being disciplined with warm-ups and taking time to imagine my circumstances, I failed in not spending enough time with the cigarette, and I failed in my inability to leave my frustration at the door. This was probably one of the sloppiest processes I've ever had as an actor. Partly, I think this was because I was so resentful to the piece, which turned into resistance to work on it. But, I also think the resistance came from being scared to play this character who was so unlike myself. In this way, I failed in being fearless.

I also failed in choosing to do theater primarily in isolation. In coming back from a semester away I felt isolated and unwilling to put myself out there, so my default was to choose a show in which I barely needed anyone else. This was a mistake. My favorite part of theater is collaborating with others, and being on stage with others. I chose a lonely process, and I will never choose to do that again.

Lastly, I think where I failed most of all was in bringing fellow theater artists, friends, and people I respect into this process with me. I obviously did not bring them into the process knowing it was going to be a miserable experience, but that was the outcome and it's what I am most regretful for.

All in all, I feel two ways about this experience: I wish I hadn't done it and I am so undoubtedly grateful that I had it. I now know how important it is for me to feel passionately about what I'm doing and I know I need to figure out how to navigate situations in which I don't feel passionately at all. This was definitely a growing process. I look back on two weeks ago and cringe thinking about how I handled things during tech week, or in thinking about the weak reasoning I used for choosing this show and attempting to dodge collaboration. I feel sad, frustrated, unfulfilled, and I wish I could do it all differently. But, I know in failing I've learned

so much. In retrospect, I've probably learned more from doing a piece that forced me to fail in almost every possible way shy of showing up and learning the lines.

6. Photos

Courtesy of the wonderful Simone Brown





7. Bibliography

Brecht, Bertolt, and Eric Bentley. *The Jewish Wife, and Other Short Plays*. Grove P., 1965.

“The Nuremberg Laws.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/winter/nuremberg.html.