Danton's Death and Woyzeck contained many expressionist elements and were strongly political in subject. It was the staging of these plays in Germany in 1902 and 1912 that inspired German writers, directors and actors to experiment with expressionist techniques and ideas.

A number of expressionist playwrights emerged in the period from 1900 to 1920, most notably Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. Their plays made expressionism an international movement in the theatre and influenced some of the twentieth century's greatest playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill in the USA and Sean O'Casey in Ireland. However, by that time, another German playwright and director had begun working whose plays would transform expressionism into epic theatre.

15.2 BERTOLT BRECHT: EPIC THEATRE

Born in Germany in 1898, Bertolt Brecht was 16 years old when the First World War began. This war, which killed 15 million people and ruined Germany, had a profound effect on him as a person and an artist.

Brecht served briefly in the army before the war ended in November 1918 and he saw its consequences for ordinary people as Germany was defeated. After the war Brecht became involved in political activity and was attracted to the doctrine of socialism, which swept Europe after the communist Russian Revolution in 1917. However, Brecht saw the consequences of an attempted communist takeover in Bavaria when he was living there in 1919, which resulted in chaos and a crackdown by the army. These events led him to believe that revolution should be the result of intelligent
thought and scientific investigation, and this conviction applied to his involvement in theatre as well as politics.

At the same time as his political interest was awakened, Brecht became increasingly involved in theatre. He was initially attracted to naturalistic theatre through the work of Gerhart Hauptmann in Germany and Emile Zola in France, because it focused on the lives of everyday people. However, in his first play, Baal, which was written in 1918, Brecht experimented with the new style of expressionist theatre; his next play, Drums in the Night, was also expressionist in form.

In 1922 Brecht directed for the first time, but he was so arrogant as a director and so rude to the actors that he was replaced. He was later allowed to contribute to the rehearsals of Drums in the Night and his next play, In the Jungle, which opened in Munich in May 1923.

Brecht became increasingly interested in the writings of Karl Marx and was influenced by Helene Weigel, the left-wing actress who bore Brecht’s first child. While politically Brecht was increasingly drawn to communism, in the theatre he continued to experiment with form, and his first major success as a playwright came in 1928 with the staging of a musical The Threepenny Opera. This play, based on John Gay’s 1728 play The Beggar’s Opera, is a savage satire on the middle class and contains many of the major elements of epic theatre. The play blames capitalist society for the existence of the criminal underworld that is the setting of The Beggar’s Opera. The music, written by Kurt Weill, is a blend of jazz, folk, and modern music, and ironically it was part of the enormous emotional appeal of the play. This was the opposite of Brecht’s intention, because he believed the ‘epic theatre’ he was creating should speak objectively to the intelligence of the audience.

**EPIC THEATRE ON STAGE**

We explored the acting techniques associated with epic theatre in chapter 4. On stage, Brecht’s plays were nearly all historical narratives that blended large-scale stories with the striking dramatic techniques he used to train his actors. The exceptions to this were the texts he wrote in which Nazi Germany was the background, or target, of the plays. Brecht took his plots from European history, from Asian myths, and from other classic plays. All his works were fiction—history and fact were transformed to suit his purpose, which was to make the audience become scientific observers who would form intelligent opinions and make rational judgments on the behaviour of the characters and the action of the play, relate these to the social and political context of the real world, and then work to change that world.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Brecht left Germany to live with his family in Denmark until 1941. This was the period when most of his greatest plays were created.

**Life of Galileo (1938)**

This play is based Galileo’s (1610) discovery that the Earth moves around the Sun, which was in total opposition to the teachings of the Church, that the Earth was the centre of the universe. Galileo was condemned by the Church, forced to recant, and spent the last part of his life under house arrest. In Brecht’s version, science is not a wonderful way of discovering and changing the world, but an instrument used by the powerful and the rich of the world to suit themselves. Everyone in the play is corrupt or vulnerable. Galileo’s daughter is reduced to being his jailer; her wealthy fiancé is in love with his wealth and his land, not her; and Galileo is not a hero but a fallible and frightened man.
Mother Courage and Her Children (1939)

This remains perhaps the greatest anti-war play ever written, and is still staged throughout the world today. See pages 52–3.

The National Theatre in the UK, one of the world's great theatre companies, staged an exceptional, modernised production of Mother Courage in 2009.

The Good Person of Szechwan (1943)

In this play Brecht is concerned with the question of just what makes a person good. The protagonist is actually a young prostitute, called Shen Te, who tries desperately to follow the rules for good behaviour taught by the gods, who actually appear in the play. The other citizens of Szechwan are hypocrites who pretend to be respectable and moral, but take every opportunity to abuse Shen Te and cheat each other. The only way Shen Te can protect herself is to disguise herself as a man. She pretends to be a powerful male cousin named Shui Ta. To be good person, Shen Te has to pretend to be someone she is not.
The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui (1941)

Brecht's famous attack on Hitler and the Nazi Parity, this play is a savage satire and a chilling reminder about how easy it is for tyrants to gain power. It is set in the vegetable markets of Chicago in the USA in the 1930s, at the time of the Great Depression. Arturo Ui, a local gangster, seizes control of the cauliflower trade and then attempts to take over the entire city. Ui is a completely laughable character at first, and the whole plot of taking over the cauliflower business is laughable. However, Ui is increasingly revealed as a complete psychopath, and he relentlessly murders anyone who stands in his way. In the most chilling scene in the play, he is coached by an actor to be a more effective public speaker; as the scene progresses, Ui is transformed into a terrifying imitation of Adolf Hitler giving a speech. The play ends in mass murder.

In 1941 Brecht sailed to the USA to escape the German armies sweeping across Europe. He settled in California and went on living in the USA until 1947, writing just one great play during that period.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1944)

This play was the most overtly communist of all Brecht's work and the prologue was not printed in the USA while he was living there. The prologue and the play ask the question: who should own the land and the means of production—capitalists with the money to buy farms and factories, or the farmers and workers who actually produce the food and machines.

In the prologue, two groups of peasants gather to argue who should own the valley where they live. The story of the chalk circle is then told, about a civil war centuries ago when the governor's wife was forced to flee and left her child behind. A servant called Grusha finds the child and cares for it. After much suffering and sacrifice to ensure the safety of the child, the war ends. The Governor's wife returns and demands the child back. Grusha is brought to a court presided over by Azdak, who places the child in a chalk circle and tells the two women to take him if they want him. The women struggle over the child but Grusha lets the Governor's wife win the tug of war because she is afraid the child will be hurt. Azdak then gives the child to Grusha because she has looked after it and proved she loves it more.

Brecht returned to Berlin in 1949 to stage Mother Courage and her Children with his wife, Helene Weigel, in the title role. This was the beginning of Brecht's own theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble, which is still one of the world's great theatre companies. Brecht devoted all his time and energy during the 1950s to the ensemble and on staging his own plays. He died in 1956.

WORKSHOP: EPIC THEATRE

Exercise 1: Working in groups, create a short improvisation about a current political or social issue, such as global warming, terrorism, child slavery in the Third World, or another issue you choose. Set the action of the piece in a different cultural setting from your own.

Exercise 2: Rehearse and perform your improvisation, applying the Brechtian performance techniques from chapter 4.

WORKSHOP: REALISING A BRECHTIAN PLAY

Exercise: Choose one of the plays mentioned in this unit and generate a short (two- to three-minute) performance. Make sure you are true to the political or social viewpoint that Brecht is putting forward as well as identifying appropriate Brechtian performance techniques (see chapter 4).