

Stargazing at Lincoln Center

GERALD WEALES

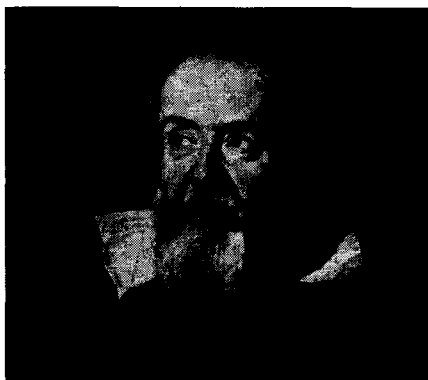
BERTOLT BRECHT's *Galileo* is the best thing that has happened to Lincoln Center since the Repertory Theatre went into operation there. Part of the praise belongs to Brecht and Charles Laughton, the translator and co-author; part to the company and director John Hirsch, who seems not intimidated by the stage, willing to use it but unwilling to sacrifice the play to it.

Galileo makes a direct satirical attack on willful ignorance, on the way vanity and self-interest can stand on ceremony in the face of an untidy truth that may upset the status quo. A garrulous old cardinal, voicing the theological opposition to Galileo's theories, drops suddenly to the personal: "I won't be a nobody on an inconsequential star briefly twirling hither and thither." The clowning monks who share the stage with the cardinal, the mathematician and the philosopher who refuse to look through the telescope, the curator of the museum who is more interested in business than in knowledge, are all done broadly, almost as caricatures. Their behavior is at once funny and infuriating, and Brecht voices the audience's exasperation by letting Andrea Sarti, the boy who grows up to be Galileo's assistant, say of the scholars who will not even look, "They are wicked." In this production, unless my ears deceived me, the boy said, "They are stupid," which is not really the same thing.

Since, for Brecht, Galileo's scientific discoveries have social consequences, the revolution in the heavens foreshadowing a revolution on earth, it is wickedness, not stupidity, that denies Galileo and finally forces him to recant. "Well, at least you have found out that it is not a question of the satellites of Jupiter, but of the peasants of the Campagna!" Brecht tells the young monk in Scene 7. As the play progresses, the opposition ceases to be comic and becomes villainous, but in both instances the point is direct,

simple, even simple-minded. If that were all there were to it, *Galileo* would be an effective but obvious teaching play.

FORTUNATELY there is more. There is the character of Galileo himself. All that is needed for the play I have described above is a scientist hero, capable of putting down his ludicrous opponents in the early scenes, who becomes a martyr to more formidable enemies. This is not Brecht's Galileo. The playwright is interested in the whole man—the connoisseur of good wine as well as the scanner of heavens. From the first scene, which opens as Galileo washes himself, we see his tender concern for his flesh, a concern that will eventually let



him look at the instruments of torture and recant. "Isn't the pleasure of drinking and washing all one with the pleasure which he takes in the new ideas?" Brecht wrote in *Kleines Organon*. "Don't forget: he thinks out of self-indulgence." The time Galileo gives to Andrea, who really wants to learn, and his impatience with the paying student who is only a dabbler are not in the play to show his dedication to truth or his indifference to creature comforts, but to show the appetite he most likes to feed.

In that first scene, too, we see Galileo as trickster, about to pass off the telescope as his own invention, and Galileo as coward, cau-

tioning Andrea not to pass on the Copernican lessons he is learning. By the time the scene ends, Galileo is established as a character. We know why he cannot keep his hands off the heavens and why he will not risk his skin to proclaim the truth he finds there. From all accounts, Laughton's Galileo was a mountain of flesh; from the washing scene at the beginning to the last scene, where he wolfed down the goose, he emphasized the side of Galileo that makes sense of Andrea's accusation after the recantation: "He saved his big gut." Anthony Quayle's Galileo never quite attains that degree of sensuousness, but that limitation aside, his is an excellent performance. Everything else is there—the abruptness, the impatience, the quickness of mind, the deviousness, the self-mockery, the irony.

THE QUESTION, of course, is what are we to make of this Galileo. Brecht is no playwright to present a character study and leave it at that. There has to be a message behind his Galileo, but the fascinating thing about this play is the ambiguity that changes and colors that message. In the first version of the play, written in 1938, Galileo is the embodiment of triumphant reason. His apparent cowardice and self-interest are the cunning that lets him escape death at the hands of the Inquisition and finish his *Discorsi* in secret. This is the kind of ends-justify-the-means reasoning that Brecht used earlier in his more obvious political *Lehrstücke*—as in the arguments of the agitators in *Die Massnahme* (1930).

That Galileo is still evident in the Brecht-Laughton version of the play, but the attitude toward him has shifted. He is still amusingly devious; the letter to the archbishop that he dictates in the last scene is as double-edged as Brecht's own testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Yet when Andrea, who comes to accuse and stays to applaud, attempts to explain away the recantation as common sense, Galileo rejects the interpretation: "I surrendered my knowledge to the powers that be. . . . I have betrayed my profession." The implication is that what was lost by Galileo's silence—in terms

not only of scientific discovery but of social change—was greater than what was gained by his finishing the book. This, at least, is his own opinion, although Andrea “cannot think that your savage analysis is the last word.”

There is an extra scene in the printed play that seems to justify the “savage analysis.” Andrea catches a group of boys teasing an old woman, calling her a witch; he makes one of them look in the window and see that it is “Just an old girl cooking porridge,” but even then the boy insists that she is a witch. There is the usual Brechtian injunction: “You saw with your own eyes: think it over!” Even so, the point of the scene seems to be that there was a moment when, excited by Galileo’s discoveries, people were willing to look at things as they are, but that now—thanks to his recantation—clear-sightedness has been delayed, perhaps even destroyed. The production at Lincoln Center does not use this final scene; the play ends on the interview between Galileo and Andrea and the audience is left with a choice. It can accept that Galileo has failed, or it can take Andrea’s option, in which case Galileo becomes a pathetic figure, an old man who has saved his neck and his work and has come to believe that neither is worth saving. That the second is the more likely choice is less Brecht’s doing than Quayle’s; his Galileo is very moving in the final scene.

ALTHOUGH my discussion of the play may suggest that it has a conventional plot, *Galileo*, like the other Brecht plays, is constructed of individual scenes, each of which is supposed to have a dramatic and ideational purpose of its own, one that is more important than any attempt to feed a continuing story line. For the most part, the scenes in *Galileo* are very effective, each making its single point sharply and clearly. One reason for this is that Brecht uses the most outrageous theatrical tricks to get his effects. In Scene 5, for instance, as we wait in the anteroom for the Vatican astronomer to pass judgment on Galileo’s findings, the churchmen denounce and mock Galileo in a confrontation that builds hysterically

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until the doors burst open and the astronomer cuts the scene physically as he strides across, and verbally in three words: "He is right." In Scene 12, we are told that the bell will ring at five o'clock, signaling Galileo's recantation. As five o'clock comes in silence, his assistants, who have been afraid that he would give in, begin to congratulate one another. As they become more and more excited—their joy balanced against the unmoving figure of Galileo's daughter, who is praying that he will recant—the bell begins to toll and their celebration is crushed.

A second reason for the effectiveness of the scenes and of the play as a whole is that Laughton's lines are so eminently playable—which cannot be said of all the Brecht



translations. Of course, the Laughton version is not really a translation; he and Brecht wrote it together. John Willett, in his book on Brecht, quotes the playwright's account of how the two men worked: "We had to decide the gist of each piece of dialogue by my acting it all in bad English or even in German, and his then acting it back in a variety of ways until I could say: that is it." Since not all translators are good actors with access to the original author, who is also a director, their method cannot be widely copied, but in this case it has paid off well.

THERE ARE a number of disturbing things in the production, among them several weak performances. For the most part, however, the production manages to hide the weaknesses. An exception is the scene in which Urban VIII, who as Cardinal Barberini has been a friend and supporter of Galileo, is being robbed while talking to the Inquisitor. At the beginning, in his underwear, a man only, he refuses to let the Inquisitor go after Galileo; at the end, in full papal regalia, an office now, not a man, he consents. This is one of the best scenes in the play, but on stage it came across badly,

primarily because George Voskovec was never sufficiently Barberini, never had a self that could be buried beneath the robes. It was probably a mistake, too, to cast Edgar Daniels as the cardinal who did not want to be "a nobody." The trick with that character is that he is excessively old and fragile, collapsing physically even while he is maundering on immortality; Daniels is too big, too obviously healthy, to carry the joke.

One of the difficulties with the past productions at the Lincoln Center has been that the stage tempts directors into crowd scenes or excessive business that swamp the play. John Hirsch, happily, has his crowds under control. There is much peripheral busywork, particularly on what looks like a pair of four-story jungle gyms that Robin Wagner has provided as set, but Hirsch never allows the focus to shift from the central business of the scene, as so often happened in Jules Irving's *The Alchemist*. Nor does the April Fools' Day scene, in which the crowd is the center, disintegrate and lose its point, as often happened in Herbert Blau's production of *Danton's Death* and Robert Symonds' *The Country Wife*. In one instance only is there a marked distraction, and that comes in the masked-ball scene. The audience not only needs to hear the conversation between Galileo and the two cardinals, but it should recognize the irony in their masks, one a dove, the other a lamb. But the scene is so loaded with clever masks that those of the cardinals do not stand out.

The costuming, as a matter of fact, is a little odd throughout. When Urban turned at the end of his dressing scene and moved grandly upstage, his glittering train fanned out behind him like an elaborate joke. It was then that I realized that James Hart Stearns must have made his designs after a visit to the Gallery of Modern Art. Not only was the Pope's train straight out of Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé*; so too were the grotesque coiffures that the ladies wore in the ball scene. Beardsley-like costumes for a Brecht play seem a bit far out, but strangely enough they work.

So, too, do the production and the play.