

## Book "Bertolt Brecht in America" by James K. Lyon released

**December 3, 1980**

During Hitler's reign in Germany, scores of intellectual and cultural leaders flocked to the United States to escape the oppression and persecution of the Nazi regime.

Among those emigres was the writer Bertolt Brecht, a man called "the strongest, most influential theater man of our time" by critic Peter Brook.

Brecht, considered by many to be the greatest dramatist of the 20th century, lived in Santa Monica from 1941 to 1947. During that period of time, he wrote plays, poetry and Hollywood scripts; he was politically and socially active, and he was the object of a long-running surveillance conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Brecht's years in America have been chronicled in a new book by James K. Lyon, professor and chairman of the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego. Lyon's book, "Bertolt Brecht in America," is being released this month by the Princeton University Press.

The detective work required of Lyon in his pursuit of information on Brecht's life in this country is a story in itself. In the eight years Lyon spent researching the book, he interviewed more than 100 people and turned up several thousand documents by and about Brecht, including a previously unpublished poem and two unpublished film stories written by Brecht.

In order to cut through the gossip and hearsay that has developed over the years about the difficult genius, Lyon insisted that any information he received be verified by at least two sources who had no contact with each other. His investigation took him all over the country, to Great Britain and to East Berlin, where he was allowed to see documents that had never before been made public. In exchange, he gave much of his material to the Brecht archives in East Berlin.

"I was engaged in a race against the clock," Lyon said. "Many of the people I interviewed were Brecht's contemporaries. I was able to speak with Brecht's widow nine months before she died. Nearly half the people I spoke with are no longer alive."

Many of the people Lyon interviewed were German emigre and people involved in film and theater during that era. Among his sources were John Huston, director Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Zero Mostel, John Houseman, W.H. Auden and writer John Ogden Stewart. One of his most helpful sources was Elsa Lanchester, wife of Charles Laughton, a close friend of Brecht's.

Lyon discovered some of Brecht's unpublished works when the widow of screenwriter Ernest Pascal allowed Lyon to search through her late husband's papers. Lyon broke open a file cabinet which had been sealed for years in search of a photograph of Brecht and actor Peter Lorre. Instead of the photograph, he found the poem and a film story.

"This is an example of the serendipity I had in doing my research," Lyon said. "Many widows couldn't bear to face their husband's belongings, and had simply boxed and stored everything. I would offer to sort through the stuff, and in doing so, would turn up valuable records."

"I have concluded that Brecht's years here were not undocumented; it's just that the material has been buried in obscure places," he said.

Lyon feels that he was lucky in obtaining as many of the FBI documents as he did, although he said that the documents often contained confusing and erroneous information.

"I would get one installment of documents and all of the names of sources would be deleted," he said. "In the next installment, the names would be left in, but something else would be deleted. They tapped his phone, and intercepted his mail, so there were some valuable copies of letters to and from Brecht's mistress, letters which Brecht had destroyed."

Lyon says he feels his book is valuable not only as a chronicle of Brecht's American experience, but as a look at the profound impact Brecht and his exiled compatriots had on this country.

"During his time in the United States, Brecht referred to himself as an 'exile in paradise.' He never planned to stay here," said Lyon. "Many other refugees did stay, however, and they enriched our culture enormously. As Nazi Germany forced so many scholars and creative people to flee to America, this country benefited. This is a story that has not yet been completely told or understood. Brecht knew all of these people, and among them he was well-known, so his life here becomes somewhat exemplary of that community."

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