

Performing the Cold War in the Postcolonial World

Theatre, Film, Literature and Things

Edited by Christopher B. Balme

First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-05158-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-05161-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-19633-4 (ebk)

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Rebecca Sturm

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003196334-11

The funder for this chapter is the European Research Council.



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Introduction

The International Theatre Institute (ITI) was founded in 1948 under the UNESCO umbrella and was thus part of a larger trend in the post war period. In the aftermath of the Second World War and with the new tensions of the Cold War apparent, international organizations like the ITI were established to serve as platforms of communication, with the idealistic hope that creating understanding between artists and theatre scholars would help prevent future global conflict. Accordingly, the ITI aimed to be autonomous and non-political, only concerned with its purpose to “promote international exchange of knowledge and practice in theatre arts” (International Theatre Institute n.d). It was already evident at the ITI’s inaugural meeting in Prague that, on the contrary, the ITI reacted to political developments and struggled to maintain a fragile balance during the Cold War Era.²

Because of the international scope of its work, it is unsurprising that the ITI – like many similar NGOs – was also the subject and stage of Cultural Cold War politics. The ITI’s organizational structure only exacerbated its potential for political interference: it was made up of national centres of the member states and had very few restrictions on how these were supposed to be structured or financed. Most national centres relied on government funding and were therefore very susceptible to state influence. The research that has already been done on the history of the ITI clearly shows that each centre operated quite differently with individual motivations dependent not only on the social and political conditions in the respective countries, but also on the theatre practitioners most involved, whose ideas and international renown shaped the work of a centre.³ But as unique as these intentions were that fuelled participation in the ITI, the Cold War had an impact on all of them, although in different ways and to varying degrees. ITI’s structure of national centres that supposedly represented all

of their respective countries' national cultures made it difficult to escape the association with the countries' role in international politics. This was the case whether or not the members of a specific centre acted in accordance with their country's political loyalties, and even if they were neither themselves aware of political interest nor actively working to further it, but solely pursuing personal or artistic goals.⁴

The ITI was predominately European in its first decade, and while the organization grew quickly, this focus changed only gradually. In the 1950s, all the World Congresses, the prestigious Théâtre des Nations festival and most of ITI's other conferences and events, took place in Europe.⁵ However, in the wake of decolonization, more and more theatre artists from Africa, Asia, and South America became involved in the ITI throughout the 1960s, establishing their own national centres and holding their own regional theatre meetings.⁶ This challenged the existing structures and an almost exclusive focus on "Western" theatre. To live up to its claim of supporting a truly international theatre community, the ITI was willing to broaden its scope and create a space to address specific issues of theatre in emerging countries where artists could share experiences. The result was the Committee for Third World Theatre (CTWT), which was established in its preliminary form in 1971 at the 13th World Congress in London and was officially founded in 1973 at the 14th World Congress in Moscow, with delegates from 21 countries from the different geographical regions of the Global South (International Theatre Institute 1973, 2). Fundamental discussions not only dominated the long planning phase but also shaped the work of the CTWT subsequently. Central questions – even the term "Third World" itself – were difficult to thoroughly define to everyone's satisfaction and remained points of contention.⁷ Figuring out what common ground they shared, where they could benefit from each other's experiences, and how they imagined the future of "Third World" theatre presented huge challenges for the committee. On many of those questions, the members were politically and artistically divided.

ITI delegates from both sides of the Iron Curtain had watched the development of the new committee with interest. Since the non-aligned countries of the Global South had become a main battleground of the Cold War, the CTWT was the object of cultural Cold War politics from its inception. It not only gave theatre artists from "Third World" countries a space to discuss their shared issues and interests but also became the contact point for other ITI members who attempted to spin this search for identity in their favour. Prominent among them were the ITI members from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). From 1976 to 1982, they hosted a series of seminars and colloquia on Brecht for theatre artists from emerging countries: these were *Theatre and Social Reality* (1976), *Brecht and the Theatre*

in Asia/Africa/Latin America and the Arab countries (1980), and *Brecht's Work and Method to Discover and Promote Cultural and National Identity* (1982). All three iterations were, as the invitation to the third seminar stated, to be understood as a thematic continuation of each other (GDR ITI n.d.-b, 1). Additionally, the Brecht Dialogue of 1978 featured a colloquium about the reception of Brecht in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that dealt with many of the same topics and participants and can therefore be considered a related event.

In the context of the CTWT, these events were hugely influential. Even Manfred Linke of the rival West German centre considered them a “thematic focal point” of the CTWT’s work (Linke 1994, 56). This chapter examines how the GDR centre of ITI used the CTWT’s framework and what cultural-policy strategy it employed to appeal to the needs and interests of theatre artists from the Global South.⁸

Inter-German politics in the ITI

The GDR centre of the ITI was not only very active in the ITI in general, but also particularly interested in and supportive of the theatrical developments in the countries of the Global South.⁹ The inter-German rivalry with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in its Cold War context was the main reason for this commitment. The FRG had joined ITI in 1956, and the GDR had followed shortly after in 1959. The two centres stayed active until they were merged after the German reunification in 1990. Both of them regularly and sometimes even simultaneously held seats in the ITI’s executive committee, contributed to the various working committees, and hosted several large and long-running ITI events, like the Theater der Welt festival in the FRG or the Brecht Dialogues in the GDR (75–78, 112).

It is unsurprising that East and West Germany were heavily involved in the ITI’s internal politics. Because the division of the country had been a major cause of the Cold War and had positioned the two German states against each other on its frontlines, they acted out their own national version of the global conflict. The pivotal point of the opposing foreign policies of the two German states was the FRG’s claim to sole representation, which was consolidated by the so-called Hallstein Doctrine and severely restricted East German foreign policy for decades. The Hallstein Doctrine stated that the West German government considered the establishment of diplomatic relations with the GDR by third countries with which it itself maintained official relations to be an unfriendly act. In this case, the FRG would restrict or end its own relations with the third country in question (Schulz 1995, 55). Since the Western Allies supported the FRG’s claim to sole representation, it was impossible for the GDR to establish normal relations with most states outside the Eastern Bloc or to join or participate on

an equal footing in international organizations such as the UN. With only very limited economic or diplomatic options, the GDR became very adept at using less political channels to achieve international success in the field of science, sports, and culture, while the FRG attempted to prevent this. Both German states operated under the same assumptions that the GDR's international achievements in the field of culture would benefit their pursuit of diplomatic recognition eventually (Neumann 2004, 83).

The ITI offered the GDR one such opportunity, because it would presumably help facilitate relations with the UNESCO and allow for stronger cultural ties to other countries that were otherwise unreachable (Zachmann 1958). Accordingly, the establishment of an ITI centre had been primarily a concern of foreign cultural politics in both German states and inseparable from the inter-German Cold War rivalry. The West German theatre experts responsible for the FRG's ITI centre initially had shown little interest in ITI's artistic merits and even called the "purely theatrical achievements of the ITI . . . unsatisfactory and not very inspiring", but nonetheless pushed for West German membership in the organization specifically to not be "overtaken once again" by the GDR on this international platform (Unruh 1955). For East German theatre artists, whose foreign contacts and opportunities were very limited compared to their West German counterparts, the ITI and the access it allowed were of far greater importance. Their Ministry of Culture shared this assessment and supported the GDR ITI with "opulent funding" with which the West German centre often could not compete, as even Linke (1994, 110) freely admitted. While the conflict changed and mellowed over the decades, the inter-German rivalry and their Cold War allegiances continued to be an important factor in their ITI activities.

Besides the general anti-imperialist solidarity that socialist countries expressed towards the decolonizing world, the Hallstein Doctrine was also the main reason why the GDR had an even stronger interest in the "Third World" than most other Eastern Bloc countries. The non-aligned countries of the Global South had been the main area of contestation between the GDR and the FRG over Germany's diplomatic representation in the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, the FRG already maintained an extensive network of diplomatic relations there and was able to display its economic superiority over the GDR, since emerging countries would hardly risk West German development aid for the diplomatic recognition of the GDR. On the other hand, the GDR hoped that the anti-colonial struggle would provide them with ideological starting points for establishing relations that would undermine the Hallstein Doctrine in the long term (Neumann 2004, 83).

Accordingly, the East German ITI centre was also interested in contacts with theatre artists from the Third World from early on. East German theatre experts such as director Fritz Bennewitz¹⁰ established contacts during their guest lectures and theatre productions in the Global South

and brought their observations about the theatre scene back to the GDR. Theatre artists from emerging countries were invited to study and work at East German theatres supervised by the GDR ITI.¹¹ The centre agreed to bilateral “friendship agreements” with other ITI centres whose members or whose country were sympathetic to it or to the GDR, such as Venezuela, the United Arab Republic, and Iraq (GDR ITI n.d.-a), in order to establish and develop a permanent cultural exchange.¹² The centre also made an effort to invite guests from the Global South not only to theatre events in the GDR but also to its own conferences and seminars.

The possibilities of the GDR ITI to support theatre in the Global South shifted in the 1970s. First, because the GDR’s position in international politics changed during the *détente*: through the Four Power Agreement in 1971, the Basic Treaty of 1972, and the admission of both German states into the UN in 1973, both countries accepted each other’s sovereignty, which relaxed tensions and ushered in the normalization of inter-German relations (Hanhimäki 2010, 203). The GDR finally gained diplomatic recognition that offered new possibilities for international exchange and was now able to use the cultural influence they had built up for other purposes. But even after the main goal behind their ITI efforts moved away from their direct struggle over equal representation and questions of legitimacy towards “theatrical development aid” for theatre artists in the Global South, inter-German rivalry and Cold War dynamics still remained at the core of the two centres’ activities. Second, the ITI’s increased efforts towards building a truly international theatre community, especially through the newly founded Committee for Third World Theatre, offered new possibilities for artistic exchange.

Representatives of both East and West Germany were present for many of the early meetings of the new committee, both as observers and as official consultants. The GDR’s strong involvement was especially noteworthy since it was initially not matched by any of the other countries of the Eastern Bloc: at the first Festival of Third World Theatre in Manila in 1971 and the accompanying ITI conference, the first event of the provisional CTWT, the director of the GDR ITI, dramaturg Walter Kohls, noticed and criticized the lack of interest displayed by his socialist allies. He recognized the importance of this shift in ITI priorities and expressed his concern about the uncontested influence that the Western countries would have on this new part of the international theatre community if they weren’t opposed by the Eastern Bloc:

As far as the socialist countries are concerned, that, as is well known, did not participate in Manila despite my request (with the exception of Poland), the following question stands in my opinion: It is obvious, and not only because of the conference in Manila, that the western countries,

above all the USA and the FRG, are making every effort to strengthen their influence in the developing countries in our sector as well. At the next meeting of the socialist countries, the importance of this work with and in these countries should be discussed. Where we are not active, the enemy is certainly at work.

(Kohls 1971, 10)

Kohls found the influence of the US education system particularly striking. He noted that for a number of representatives from developing countries “after their contribution to the discussion, one could tell without too much effort where they had received their training, and not only on the basis of their language skills, but especially in terms of the content of what they were saying”. He suggested that the socialist members of ITI should focus more on teaching theatre artists from the Global South as well (10–11).

Brecht as an East German figurehead

Bertolt Brecht was a figurehead of East German theatre and the obvious subject for many of the international activities of the GDR centre of ITI. As one of the most prominent theatre personalities of the twentieth century, he attracted strong international interest in both his theories and plays. Brecht and his theatre troupe, the Berliner Ensemble (BE), had been not only crucial to the GDR’s efforts of promoting East German theatre abroad in general, but had also played an important role paving the way for East German theatre artists into the ITI community specifically. After their breakthrough at the Festival International d’Art Dramatique in 1954 in Paris (Barnett 2017, 62), the BE regularly returned for guest performances. In 1957, only a few months after Brecht’s death and after the festival had rebranded as Théâtre des Nations and gained its ITI-association, the BE now led by Helene Weigel performed *Mother Courage* on the premiere of the festival to much critical and audience attention (Aslan 2009; Hüfner 1968; Peslin-Ursu 2009). This solidified the association of Brecht and East German theatre with the ITI members. Accordingly, Brecht remained a strong focus of most of the international activities of the GDR centre of ITI in the following decades.

In addition, Brecht was also easy to appropriate and to use for foreign cultural politics. One problem that members of both German ITI centres faced when promoting German theatre abroad and engaging with their German rivals was the challenge to distinguish themselves from each other. During other international theatre events like the International Association of Theatre Critics’ (IACT) colloquium on “Third World” theatre during the International Festival in Hammamet, Tunisia, in 1972, East German writer Rainer Kerndl (1972, 2) had noted that not only Western but also Arab

and African representatives tended not to differentiate between Eastern and Western when talking about European theatre in opposition to theatre in countries of the Global South. This lack of distinction was a potential problem for GDR policy makers and members of their ITI centre, who proclaimed that their relations to the countries of the decolonizing world were fundamentally different from the “imperialist” West. In the inter-German conflict, this problem was only exacerbated. Despite the separation into two opposing states with different political systems, underlying ideologies, and allegiances, the culture in both German states still drew from the same shared history with the same defining works and artists. Even in the countries of their respective Cold War allies, German culture was often regarded as unified, with little or no distinction made between material provided by the East or the West.¹³ This was a problem for the GDR in particular: the understanding of Germany as one nation merely divided into two states undermined its efforts to achieve a sovereign, equal position in international politics. To claim this body of cultural works for themselves, they therefore had to promote their own interpretations of them while simultaneously trying to dismiss the others as ideologically distorted.

Compared to the works of the Weimar classicism, those of Brecht were significantly easier to claim as an exclusively East German part of their theatrical heritage by the GDR’s foreign cultural policy makers. His ties to the GDR were not just a matter of interpretation: Brecht’s return from exile to East Berlin, where he had founded his own theatre company with his wife Helene Weigel, made it obvious that the artist himself had chosen East Germany over its Western rival. Both the Berliner Ensemble and many of his former students very directly carried on his legacy in the GDR after his death in 1956. The strong international interest in Brecht therefore translated itself naturally into a strong interest in the BE specifically and the East German theatre more generally. Additionally, Brecht’s openly communist convictions, which had informed both his theories and plays, allowed the GDR to combine Brecht’s work with the realities of GDR socialism and present them as inherently linked. According to Brecht, by maintaining a critical distance to the proceedings on stage through the use of *Verfremdung* instead of being emotionally immersed, the audience would become aware of the reality of the socioeconomic inequalities presented in the plays and be thereby transformed from passive art consumers into political actors. This inherently political intention of his work strongly invited talk about East German socialism.

While Brecht’s close alignment with GDR politics made him an effective figurehead for cultural politics, it also presented a constant risk to the artist’s reputation. He became especially controversial in the FRG, where several boycotts of his plays were sparked by political events in the GDR. His apparent support of the East German communist party SED as it was

misrepresented by a partially published letter by Brecht to Walter Ulbricht in 1953 earned him heavy criticism in the Western world (Harkin 2011). After both the popular uprising in 1953 and the building of the Berlin Wall several years after his death, many West German theatres temporarily stopped performing Brecht (Rischbieter 1999, 50–52). Those in the Western world and elsewhere who did not subscribe to a harsh condemnation of Brecht continued to stage and study Brecht and develop their own interpretations of his work that often differed from the ideologically sanctioned versions in the GDR and the performance style pursued by the BE. Both of these reactions were a potential threat to the GDR's use of Brecht and the BE in foreign cultural politics. The positive image of Brecht and his company had to be upheld and the association of Brecht with exclusively East German theatre as well as the status of the East German artists and scholars as the indisputable experts on Brechtian theatre to be defended continuously.

The first series of international ITI events on Brecht was the Brecht Dialogues, which were started by the GDR centre in collaboration with the BE in 1968 for the 70th anniversary of Brecht's birth. It featured not only many of his former associates and students as experts but also international theatre artists like Giorgio Strehler and Juri Ljubimov.¹⁴ While the BE was responsible for the programme and publications for these events, the GDR centre used their international ITI contacts to invite many prolific foreign guests (Ebermann 1979, 2). While the GDR ITI was already trying to include many theatre artists from emerging countries and used the opportunity to further develop these contacts (Ebermann 1968, 11), the programme was clearly still aimed at a mostly European audience.¹⁵ During the Brecht Dialogue, the members of the GDR ITI observed that there was a huge interest in Brecht not only in the West but in the Global South as well. Since then, they were looking to specifically address theatre artists from emerging countries (Dierichs 1969). When planning for separate events for these artists began in earnest in 1975, the existence of the CTWT required some additional attention.

Navigating the committee for Third World theatre

On the one hand, the newly founded CTWT was very beneficial to the GDR ITI's increased efforts concerning theatre in the Global South, since it provided an official international platform for events aimed only at artists from emerging countries. On the other hand, the GDR ITI now had to also deal with the restrictions that were set in place specifically to limit their outside interference.

The members of the CTWT were aware of the interest from both sides of the Iron Curtain in their committee and wary of attempts to influence

their work. They themselves were politically and artistically very divided: some members had ties to the Eastern or Western Bloc through scholarships or other previous visits and maintained some of their contacts, some had strong political convictions that did or did not match one or the other side of the Cold War, and others were against all outside influence on their indigenous forms of theatre. The committee quickly chose to establish a few rules to limit this outside participation: delegates from ITI centres not belonging to the “Third World” could not join the committee and were only allowed to follow the sessions as observers. The only exception to this rule were the consultants that were to help with the organization of festivals and conferences, who were chosen by the committee members based on their prior experiences with “Third World” theatre (International Theatre Institute 1973, 2–3). Accordingly, any official events of the CTWT Theatre were only to be hosted in a country belonging to the “Third World”. East German theatre director Fritz Bennewitz, who had previously worked as a guest director in India, and was therefore familiar to many of the committee members, was elected as one of the consultants of the CTWT. This granted the GDR ITI more access to the committee than would have been otherwise possible. It also made the already highly regarded Bennewitz an easy choice as the official organizer of the planned series of seminars (GDR ITI 1976a, 1).

As a non-‘Third World’ country, the GDR was nonetheless not technically allowed to host an official event of the Third World Committee. This was disadvantageous, since the affiliation with the ITI would provide them with a greater reach through the ITI networks and the newsletters and publication distributed to all national centres, and with the image of a non-political cultural event of a UNESCO-associated NGO. Bennewitz, who knew most about the politically tense situation in the Committee, considered this to be vitally important to the success of the seminar and advised the GDR ITI to proceed cautiously. In his opinion, it was “out of the question to offer a seminar at the Congress that is hosted by the Ministry of Culture” (Bennewitz n.d, 2). To keep the benefits of an official ITI event without overtly violating the rules of the Committee, he proposed a “tactical” solution: the GDR ITI made their willingness to hold an event known to the board of the CTWT who would then “expressively” ask the GDR centre to host a seminar. Bennewitz suggested to discuss this strategy with the acting president of the committee, Lebanese playwright and theatre director Jalal Khoury (1–2). Khoury had been a guest at the Brecht Dialogue of 1968, had an existing relationship with members of the GDR centre, and was therefore a likely ally in this plan. That way, the seminar was, even if not official, still endorsed by the Committee. Furthermore, in order to emphasize the connection to the CTWT and to downplay any GDR political agenda, it was decided that the seminar would be

opened with a speech by the Vice President of the CTWT, the Nigerian theatre scholar Joel Adedeji (GDR ITI 1976a, 1). Adedeji's advocacy of Pan-Africanism and the preservation of traditional indigenous forms of theatre was viewed with scepticism by the GDR centre, which feared that his opposition to any artistic European influence in the CTWT would also reduce their access to the committee.¹⁶ Because of his official position in the CTWT, Adedeji's central role in the proceedings helped connect the event to the CTWT. His artistic differences with the East German ITI members also emphasized the independence of the committee and avoided "the danger of favouritism" (1). As an indicator of how well the GDR centre succeeded in associating their event with the CTWT, one can consider the fact that even Linke (1994, 56) of the FRG ITI counted *Theatre and Social Reality* among the CTWT events.

Another restriction of official ITI events was that the GDR centre of the ITI couldn't autonomously decide who to invite. Instead, it was required to send invitations to all centres belonging to the CTWT, which were then responsible for passing the information along to their members or delegating whomever they thought appropriate. The board of the GDR ITI wanted to secure an atmosphere sympathetic and open to their political cause and artistic ideas (Hengst 1975, 2), but were acutely aware of the differing artistic and ideological opinions and situations of the theatre artists grouped together in the CTWT:

An important point is to identify the needs of each country. The developing countries comprise four major cultural areas with huge differences in traditions and realities of the situation in the field of theatre. The situation in each country must be studied carefully, especially the question of who to reach, which organisations to rely on to identify the right people. The success of the seminar will depend on which people come.

(Kohls 1975a, 2)

Moreover, they were also obligated to have the event be open to observers from all other ITI member states as well, which would have meant a strong presence of ITI delegates from Western Europe or North America who were geographically close and more likely able to afford the travel costs. The team agreed to keep the number of observers from capitalist countries as low as possible (Kohls 1975b, 4). To achieve this, Bennewitz (n.d., 1) suggested that the official invitation for the seminar should state a strict limit to the number of observers due to the small capacities of the event. This granted the GDR ITI the possibility to select only observers from countries they wanted to be present from the applications they received.

The members of the East German centre also did not offer the full number of available places to the ITI. In addition to sending the official invitations to the ITI centres, they sent out invites to individual theatre artists who were already known to the members of the GDR ITI because of either guest performances, guest lectures, meetings during international theatre events, or previous visits to the GDR. Some of these invitations weren't even sent by the ITI centre, but by the individual East German theatre artists themselves (GDR ITI 1975a, 1). In one case, Youssif El-Ani, President of the Iraqi centre of ITI, complained that his compatriot Ibrahim Jallal of the Iraqi Artists' Union had already received a personal invitation by East German theatre scholar Joachim Fiebach while his official ITI invite had apparently been forgotten (El-Ani 1976). Some of these additional guests were invited through bilateral cultural agreements and with the help of friendship societies (Kohls 1975a, 2). Furthermore, the ITI centre also invited theatre artists from emerging countries that were already staying in the GDR, studying, or working at a theatre as part of scholarships or exchange programmes (GDR ITI 1975b, 2). These attendees were already more familiar with GDR theatre practice, Brecht reception, and their ideological framework.

As a result of this strategy, 16 theatre artists from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Arab World attended the colloquium in 1976. There were six observers from the USSR, CSSR, Sweden, France, and Japan (Fiebach 1977, 4–5). The GDR ITI was very pleased with this composition and the lack of any political disagreement that resulted from it.

It proved to be favourable that in addition to official ITI delegates, there were also participants who had been specifically invited on the basis of long-standing contacts and who are real disseminators in their countries; these included, for example, Prof. Alkazi from India, Alfred Faragh from Egypt and Lutgado Labad from the Philippines. A qualified core emerged, which had a positive impact on the other participants. Due to the personality of Alfred Faragh, it was possible, for example, that political differences of the Arab participants were not carried into the forum, which significantly contributed to the standard of the event.

(GDR ITI 1976b, 6–7)

With all these measures in place, the GDR ITI created a space where they could circulate their ideas largely unchallenged by any Western influence, while still at least seemingly adhering to the rules of the ITI.

GDR theatre artists as partners in nation building

When GDR centre of ITI started planning the first seminar, the Ministry of Culture had expressed the intent “to make this seminar a regular institution

and to hold them about every two years in order to create a continuity and thus gain better influence, especially on leadership cadres in developing countries” (Kohls 1975a, 2). Since it was already intended to be the first part in a series of events, the planning for *Theatre and Social Reality* was crucial. The East German theatre experts who were tasked with drafting the concept for the first seminar had considerable personal experience with the situation of theatre in various countries of the Global South: The programme was prepared by Bennewitz and theatre scholars Ursula Püschel and Fiebach, the latter having spent years as a guest lecturer in Nigeria and Tanzania (GDR ITI 1975c, 1). The team also included Brecht experts from the BE like Manfred Wekwerth and Joachim Tenschert, theatre scholar Rolf Rohmer, and Kohls and officials from the Ministry of Culture (Kohls 1975a, 1).

While the title *Theatre and Social Reality* did not mention Brecht by name, its programme and the chosen cultural policy approach were based on the assessment of the Brecht Dialogue 1968: the GDR ITI had observed that the central topic of the Brecht Dialogue *Politics in the Theatre* had been “met with particularly strong interest among representatives of young nation states” (Dierichs 1969, 1). In retrospect, however, and also in response to criticism from the participants, the members of the ITI centre felt that the issue had been approached too cautiously for fear of political provocations. This restraint was deemed unnecessary, and they resolved to trust “more boldly in the quality of our intelligent arguments and theatrical successes” in the future (Ebermann 1968, 8). Hence, it was decided to focus the programme more on cultural politics than actual theatre praxis (Kohls 1975a, 2). For the GDR ITI, this approach was self-evident since they considered the art produced on the East German stages to be inseparably linked to the political system of the GDR. Tenschert expressed this sentiment during one of the meetings as such: “Politics in theatre is the defining element on our stages. When we convey this, it is not a political course, but we start from the actual theatre, where politics is done with the instruments of art” (Kohls 1975b, 2).

The Brecht Dialogue had been a panel discussion of selected Brecht experts to guarantee a high level of conversation. However, this format had excluded most of the participants from the Global South from the actual discussion. From the feedback on the Brecht Dialogue, the members of the GDR ITI determined that many of the current questions discussed among East German theatre artists weren’t useful to theatre artists from the Global South. The discussion had generally assumed the possibilities of a well-equipped established European theatre house, without considering the material limitations that theatre artists from the Global South had to face.¹⁷ They were also hard to follow for those not up-to-date on current East German Brecht discourse (Ebermann 1968, 6–7), especially since high-quality or any translations of Brecht’s writing at all were still rare in

many emerging countries.¹⁸ Another significant discrepancy was the differing political and social realities. The Global South was, according to Rudolf Greiser, Deputy Head of the Department for UNESCO and International Organisations at the Ministry of Culture, in the “stage of bourgeois revolution” with socialism not yet implemented. The current experiences of East German theatre artists in an advanced socialist society were not comparable and would “not be met with understanding” (Kohls 1975b, 2). Instead, the team believed the struggles of the decolonizing world would be most similar to the problems the GDR had faced in the early post-war period:

The countries of the Third World are in a stage of great social upheaval. After a long period of colonial oppression, they are beginning to become aware of their own national values. Progressive theatre in these countries is trying to actively support this process of change. To what extent it succeeds depends on its means, methods and possibilities. After World War II, our country was shattered and ruined and faced similar problems. The comparison between the situations then and now speaks for itself; such development processes can also help theatre-makers from the young nation-states to find suitable approaches.

(Hengst 1975, 3)

This comparison between the struggle of the early GDR, a small country isolated and bullied by the powerful Western Allies, and the struggle of decolonization was not made only to express sympathy. The GDR presented itself as a partner in nation building, sharing the experiences of successfully overcoming these problems that would be equally useful to emerging countries.¹⁹ Theatre was considered a tool of political and societal change. Thus, the development of both the GDR theatre and the GDR state were offered as models to follow.

The seminar programme for *Theatre and Social Reality* was designed according to this brand of soft power. The topics of the individual panels and discussions reflected the chosen focus on cultural politics and the usefulness of Brecht’s theatre to the process of nation building: the first panel on “Problems of depicting social conditions and social attitudes on stage” was considered by the members of the GDR ITI to be the “main topic” of the seminar. Notably, the two Brecht experts of the team, Wekwerth and Tenschert, were responsible for it (GDR ITI 1975d, 1).

In his introductory “comments” on the issue, Wekwerth conveyed the GDR position as it has been formulated in the planning phase. He referred to Brecht who – according to Wekwerth – had always considered two political dimensions in his productions: first was the great ideological conflict,

which Wekwerth in line with Marxist–Leninist theory described as “the epoch of transition from capitalism to communism” (Fiebach 1977, 9). Second was the “daily politics”, the concrete current social questions and struggles in different countries. While Wekwerth argued that it was “easy enough to dispute and argue about great epochs”, it was “much more complicated” to find out what was useful for solving more individual problems. In regard to theatre, he emphasized that in different societies and situations, the same play would have a different effect. By that, Wekwerth made it clear that the GDR participants were deliberately not trying to encourage Third World theatre artists to copy the East German style of theatre performance. Instead, they wanted to inspire them to approach their theatre productions with a similar political intention. Wekwerth also pre-emptively addressed contradictory opinions which questioned the effectiveness of Brecht and his didactic plays as tools to achieve social change. By disputing these “dangers in present day theatre work” (10), he again emphasized that Brecht – from the GDR’s perspective – was the way to go when depicting social reality on stage.

The seminar participants were then shown two films that both depicted socialist revolutions: the East German film adaptation of *Optimistic Tragedy* (1971) directed by Wekwerth and excerpts of the BE production of Brecht’s *Days of the Commune* (1962) directed by Wekwerth and Tenschert. Introducing the films, Wekwerth explained how the perspective of the citizens of the GDR living in stable socialist conditions differed from the revolutionary struggle and the national liberation movements of the Third World (11–13). But these two East German films about revolutions were meant to show that there was still a connection regardless.

Afterwards, the participants of the seminar discussed both Wekwerth’s lecture and the films shown and reflected how they applied to the different situations in their respective countries: Ebrahim Alkazi, the director of the National School of Drama in New Delhi, brought up the revolution that Gandhi had initiated in India, which he felt was often overlooked in these discussions (14). Egyptian journalist and writer Rauf Mossad Bassta referred to the ongoing civil war in Lebanon to explain what opportunities artists had to play a part in such events (15). While they had different interests and drew different conclusions from the films, the participants generally agreed with the framework that Wekwerth had provided. They also accepted the role in which the GDR presented itself in. Reoti Sarab Sharma, playwright and secretary of the Indian ITI centre, explicitly stated that he did not believe that the GDR centre of ITI was trying to indoctrinate the participants or tell them how to wage a revolution: “Most of the third world countries have achieved some sort of revolution and they need

not be taught how to make a revolution” (16). He was also decidedly not interested in copying the European models shown:

The Third World theatre men must understand their own country and their own people and then alone they will find that they can produce a theatre that is really indigenous, that is really revolutionary, that is really original.

(17)

Wekwerth reaffirmed this interpretation during the discussion and restated what the GDR wanted to convey both in general and in relation to theatre: “I think we are all revolutionaries in that we know that one cannot export a revolution. One can only show the methods one used in order to find out what has general validity” (15).

Additionally, great care was taken to present the hosts and guests as equals. While the presentation of GDR theatre and solutions was important, the East German ITI members were determined not to have the event appear as a one-sided lecture. The concept draft already stated: “The delegates are not students, but partners!” (Hengst 1975, 2). Instead of having traditional lectures from the East German theatre experts, the GDR ITI opted for a more open discussion. Some of the guests from emerging countries were asked to hold presentations and bring films and other documentation of performances to allow the guests to share and compare their experiences with each other (2). To guide the discussion, the ITI centre appointed one or two East German speakers for each topic who were responsible for outlining the basics of the GDR perspective in shorter contributions. They had to be able to contribute to all topics to some extent to support their colleagues in their arguments and to be flexible enough to respond to input from the participants (GDR ITI 1976a, 1). This structure was intended to “create an atmosphere of give and take and still do not leave things to chance” (Kohls 1975b, 3), in which the East Germans participated as equals in a discussion on the range of topics they themselves had carefully selected.

Overall, the participants from the Third World were given much room to discuss among themselves. On the second topic, “History and Culture – Cultural Traditions” (Fiebach 1977, 29–59), there was no lecture at all from the East German side. Instead, five participants from different parts of the world gave presentations on the topic. These were the basis for the subsequent discussions in which the participants talked in more detail about the situation in their respective countries and the different ways of dealing with, for example, traditional forms of theatre, traditional subjects, and myths. They noted that despite a shared colonial past, there were often strong differences between the states of their theatre or their approaches to traditions. Rohmer, who was responsible for guiding the discussion on

this topic from the GDR side, limited himself to noting the differences in the various countries and summarizing various aspects of the discussion in a contribution to one of the conversations (Fiebach 1977, 44). While the East German participants did present their perspectives to provide impulses for the discussion, this did not prevent the conversation from often moving in different directions corresponding to the interests of the participants. For example on the subject of “Theatre and Audience”, the participants began discussing forms of audience participation and improvisation, which were unusual in European theatre and therefore had not been addressed by Püschel in her introductory lecture (Fiebach 1977, 60–69).

The practical examples of East German theatre also had to fit the theme of the colloquium and provide “basic social experiences” (Kohls 1975a, 3). Consequently, the participants were shown a student performance of *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* by Boris Vasilyev at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin and had the opportunity to attend the GDR Workers’ Festival in Dresden (GDR ITI 1976b, 4). These theatre performances had fewer resources and were not as carefully crafted to the purpose of foreign politics as the BE’s performances on its many foreign tours and were therefore considered easier to “internationalize” (Kohls 1975a, 3).

After the intentions of the organizers had been so successfully realized for *Theatre and Social Reality*, the following events for theatre artists of the Third World in the GDR largely followed its model. At the colloquium on problems of Brecht reception in Africa, Asia, and Latin America at the Brecht Dialogue 1978, the “discussion leader” Heinz-Uwe Haus refrained from giving a lecture of his own and asked the participants to speak about their experiences and unresolved issues (Hahn 1979, 40–41). The Brecht Days 1980 were divided into two parts: first, reports about Brecht’s reception in the different regions of the Global South and, second, “dialogues” on various topics like “Theatre practise with Brecht” and “Dialectics in the theatre”. (Paffrath 1980). The title of *Brecht’s Work and Method to Discover and Promote National and Cultural Identity* already made it obvious that the 1982 seminar continued to adhere closely to the conceptual template of *Theatre and Social Reality*, but with a greater focus on practical experiences and insights into the daily work of GDR theatrical institutions (GDR ITI 1982).

It is conspicuous that, despite all this talk of “Brecht’s methods”, key concepts of Brecht’s theories, like the V-Effekt and even the term Epic Theatre itself, went completely unmentioned in these documents. This did not go unnoticed to East German observers. Thomas Wieck commented on this in an article in *Theater der Zeit* about the Brecht Dialogue of 1978:

Most used word at the Dialogue: ‘Brecht’s method’. Not atypical for this Dialogue that this term was only rarely and timidly concretised in terms of meaning. Some invoked the term as a panacea, others apparently had

a “firm grip” on the method, the next wondered what could possibly be meant by it, for much of what went by the name of “Brecht method” in those days seemed nebulous to them and a few thought nothing at all of the term and its possible content.

(Wiek 1978, 6)

There were various strategic reasons for why this side of Brecht’s work was considerably de-emphasized when addressing an international audience. The stylistic aspects of Brecht’s Epic Theatre didn’t lend themselves well to the GDR’s foreign cultural policy purposes. They clashed with the artistic Soviet dogma of Socialist Realism and therefore presented a recurring contradiction to their Cold War loyalties. Since it was the official artistic style of the USSR, theatre artists from the GDR had joined their colleagues from other Eastern Bloc countries in arguing for Socialist Realism and against plays and performance styles that contradicted its principles at ITI events. The most significant such debate took place at the Helsinki Congress itself, where the keynote speech and theses of dramatist Ionescu on the avant-garde had provoked the delegates of the socialist countries into a united stance.²⁰ Similar discussions remained commonplace in the ITI for the following decades, when the dogma of Socialist Realism had long since been relaxed. Brecht’s formalist tendencies had been a major point of controversy for East German policy makers and theatre artists in the 1950s, since they were deemed in opposition to the so-called “Stanislavsky method” with which the Soviet Union appropriated and propagated the writings of Stanislavsky as the exemplary theatrical implementation of Socialist Realism (Rischbieter 1999, 89). While eventually the GDR theatre internally found ways to reconcile Brecht and Stanislavsky (Hasche, Schölling, and Fiebach 1994, 173), the notion of their incompatibility nonetheless persisted. When promoting Brecht as a figurehead of East German theatre on international platforms like ITI, the GDR theatre artists were therefore mindful not to disturb the impression of artistic unity among the Eastern Bloc by drawing attention to the differences. They instead de-emphasized the stylistic aspect of Epic Theatre and instead chose to focus on the political intentions of Brecht’s plays and theory, so that Brecht would not serve as an argument against Stanislavsky or vice versa.²¹ The film recording of *Days of the Commune* shown to the participants of *Theatre and Social Reality* was meant to support this supposed compatibility. Wekwerth pointed out that the film did not correspond to the typical Brechtian style but owed much to Stanislavsky: “When you see the film, you will say ‘But that isn’t Brecht!’ By the way, Brecht also studied Stanislavsky and was one of the few who really knew him” (Fiebach 1977, 12).

Another reason for this focus may have been that the GDR in this way tried to steer in the opposite direction of alternative interpretations of

Brecht that ran counter to their cultural-policy intentions. The following report of a conversation during the Brecht Dialogue 1978 by East German theatre scholar and critic Ernst Schumacher indicates that both the East Germans and the theatre artists from emerging countries considered the fragmentation of Brecht's theory a possibly problematic phenomenon when it distorted or disregarded the ideological aspects of Brecht's work: by way of introduction, theatre director Heinz-Uwe Haus had asked the participants if – in their respective countries – Brecht's plays were staged with “the text unchanged” or if they were used only as “suggestions of subject matters and themes” that “could only be transported to the audience through a complete reorganization of the scenic material and even transformation of characters and motivations”. Several speakers from different parts of the world confirmed that the latter approach was commonly used. Nigerian playwright and later Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka, for example, referred to a performance of the *Threepenny Opera* in which the rival factions of the play were transformed into representations of groups trying to gain influence in Nigeria (Schumacher n.d., 16). Ronald Davis mentioned the San Francisco Mime Troupe who had performed Brecht's *Turandot* as a Chinese opera with regard to a mostly Chinese audience. While these examples were seen as proof of Brecht's versatility, Schumacher was also wary that such “national, regional or ethnic” (Schumacher n.d., 17) adaptations would lead to a loss of what they considered the central aspects of Brecht's work and could “from a socialist standpoint, omit the internationalist problems” (Schumacher n.d., 18) towards which the audience was supposed to be directed.

Other speakers noticed a trend of performances that would focus exclusively on the formal and technical tools of Epic Theatre, without recognizing their political purpose or Brecht's position as “an antipode to bourgeois modernism”. Dramatist Luis de Tavira Noriega reported that Mexican theatre troupes either played “de-ideologized” versions of Brecht or used his methods without staging his plays (Schumacher n.d., 17). These realities of international Brecht performances presented the East Germans who aimed to use Brecht's work to promote GDR socialism with opposing problems. An adaptation of his subject matter to local conditions risked losing the universality of Brecht's statements, while a focus purely on style made it easy to disregard the political aspect of Brecht's work completely. Ernst Schumacher reasoned that adaptations of Brecht “must therefore clearly externalise the basic political conviction immanent in Brecht's work, which is directed towards socialism” (Schumacher n.d., 18). For the purposes of foreign cultural politics, it was therefore useful to focus not on the style of Epic Theatre and little on the plays' subject matters, but instead emphasize the political conclusions that the audience was supposed to reach.

Conclusion

It is hardly surprising that the ITI as any other international organization of artistic exchange became involved in the cultural Cold War and that its work concerning the Global South in particular drew the attention of cultural policy makers. Because of the inter-German rivalry, the GDR was uniquely motivated to gain influence in the Global South, and the members of the East German centre of ITI were especially active in the ITI.

This chapter has shown how carefully the members of the GDR ITI had formulated their own national brand of soft power and designed the programme of their events accordingly. They had cleverly navigated ITI's Committee for Third World Theatre and in doing so had managed to use its reach and image while avoiding its restrictions to create conditions suitable to their cultural policy goals. The topics and their presentation conveyed a clear message: Brecht's work was useful when trying to reinvent or rediscover a national culture characterized strongly by the fight against imperialist oppression. The GDR theatre artists who had helped overcome similar struggles and establish a socialist society in their own country could offer their experience and advice. Adopting Brecht's theory and adapting Brecht's plays would help advance society and face the various struggles the "Third World" was facing.

But even if the seminars and colloquia held for theatre artists of the Global South were fundamentally motivated by the GDR ITI's national and Cold War interests, and the approach was in line with foreign cultural politics, they were also closely based on the wishes and feedback of the participants invited. The work that the East German theatre experts had already done in the ITI or during guest performances or lectures abroad had given them extensive knowledge of both the inner workings and current theatrical discourse of the CTWT and the situation and needs of theatre artists in emerging countries. This had earned them some appreciation from members of the CTWT, which was also crucial to the success of the seminars. To propagate their view on the political purpose of Brecht's theatre, they needed to be open to uses of Brecht's work that didn't conform to the East German handling of Brecht or the performance style of the BE. The format of the seminar intentionally created a space for the artists from emerging countries to express themselves in order for the GDR to appear as an equal partner.

Notes

- 1 The research for this chapter received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreement No. 694559 – Developing Theatre). I would like to thank the German ITI centre for providing access to their uncatalogued archival records.

- 2 For more on the inaugural meeting in Prague and how it almost didn't happen, see Canning (2015, 156–85).
- 3 Among them are Viviana Iacob's research on how Romanian theatre artists used the ITI to gain international recognition in the Cold War period (Iacob 2018), Hanna Korsberg's article on the 8th World Congress in Helsinki that illustrates how Cold War opposition influenced the artistic debates (Korsberg 2017), and Charlotte Canning's chapter on the US centre of the ITI in her book about the history of the American National Theatre and Academy (Canning 2015).
- 4 The US centre of ITI provides an example of this: while its director Rosamond Gilder was a "staunch internationalist" (Canning 2015, 171) dedicated to the idealistic goals of the ITI and the centre operated accordingly, its work in the 1950s was funded by the Farfield Foundation, that unbeknownst to Gilder at the time was a covert CIA organization used to funnel money into projects useful to the Cold War cause (178–79).
- 5 For more on ITI's activities, also see Viviana Iacob's article on *Cold War Mobilities: Eastern European Theatre Going Global* in this volume.
- 6 For a short overview over this history of the CTWT, see Khoury (1977).
- 7 The term "Third World" remained controversial until the name of the Committee was changed to Committee for Cultural Identity and Development in 1985 (Linke 1994, 54–59).
- 8 This chapter is mainly based on archive material from the Bundesarchiv and the private archive of ITI Germany. Most of this material is in German and the translations are my own.
- 9 According to Manfred Linke, the main supporters of the CTWT were France, the GDR, Sweden, and the Soviet Union (Linke 1994, 57).
- 10 While his work had been unstudied for a long time, much has been written about Bennewitz as a theatre director in the Global South in the last decade. See Esleben (2011, 2014, 2016); Rohmer (2011); and John (2011, 2012).
- 11 One example for this practice was Nelly Garçon, actress and member of the Venezuelan ITI centre, who stayed in the GDR in 1969/70. Her study programme was compiled by the ITI centre and included internships at East German theatres and courses at the Academy of Dramatic Arts (Ebermann 1969).
- 12 These agreements usually specified in detail what the theatrical exchange between the two centres would look like in the coming years. An important point was often that both centres agreed to receive a delegation, an artist, or a scholarship holder from the other centre and to finance their stay. For the East German centre, these "friendship agreements" were important because the East German mark was a purely domestic currency and therefore non-convertible. This way, the problem of currency exchange could be easily avoided.
- 13 Peter Ulrich Weiß examines one such example of how this lack of distinction between East and West German culture was a major obstacle for the GDR even with one of its Warsaw Pact allies in a time of political tensions with Romania in 1969 (Weiß 2005).
- 14 A documentation of the Brecht Dialogue had been published by the Brecht Centre (Hecht 1969): for an examination of the Brecht commemorations in the GDR in the context of the BE's struggles with political expectations and its own identity crises in the late 1960s and 70s, see Bradley (2011).
- 15 Only three experts from the countries of the Global South had been selected for the panel discussions of the Brecht Dialogue in 1968. At the closing ceremony,

- international guests were given the opportunity to talk about the Brecht reception in their countries. But these reports were given at the end of the Dialogue and were not discussed afterwards (Hecht 1969).
- 16 This sentiment become obvious in Bennewitz's report about his visit to the Third Festival of Traditional Arts at the Maison de la Culture in Rennes:

ADEDEJI took the extreme opposite position and wanted to let the present mission in the discovery and preservation of the traditional alone be valid – in doing so, the danger of purism became clear (not to impute or reproach Adedeji, but certainly derivable as a danger: purism in the behaviour of tradition as the purpose and weapon of reaction and neo-colonialism).
(Bennewitz 1976, 3)
 - 17 Chérif Khaznadar, who participated in the panel of theatre directors and actors, noted at some point during the discussion that the topics which had been addressed so far did not mirror his experiences in Syria at all, where the lack of professional theatre created a very different relationship between actors and the director (Hecht 1969, 169).
 - 18 When the deputy of the Minister of Culture, Werner Rackwitz, visited the 1976 seminar to listen to the participants' suggestions about what concrete aid the GDR would be able to offer the theatre of their countries, the lack of or inadequate translations of Brecht's plays were one of the primary concerns (GDR ITI 1976b, 5).
 - 19 This is in line with the GDR's general foreign policy towards the Global South. Both East and West Germany argued that their status as a "young nation" was the reason for a special connection and solidarity with the decolonized countries (Schulz 1995, 8). Support for nation building was an important focus of East German foreign policy overall (Saehrendt 2017, 49, 55), which was understood by the GDR to be a fundamentally different kind of relationship with the Global South than Western "imperialist" development aid (Schulz 1995, 15), because it was "free from exploitation, pursuit of profit, and oppression of other peoples" (Doernberg 1982, 191).
 - 20 For an in-depth analysis of the debate at the Helsinki Congress, see Korsberg (2017 155–57).
 - 21 When the questions came up during the General Assembly of the GDR ITI in 1962, Kohls stated: "Although the Stanislavsky-Brecht dispute deserves extraordinary interest, I do not consider the ITI to be the organisation to deal with and clarify problems. To repeat the position: we have foreign policy tasks, internal discussions are on a different level" (GDR ITI 1962, 4). But even though the GDR ITI had decided early on not to address Brecht's (in)compatibility with Stanislavsky, the matter would remain with them for a long time. Still in 1986 at one of their workshops for theatre directors, the East German theatre experts were eager to demonstrate the similarities of Brecht and Stanislavsky to "eliminate the nonsensical argument of Stanislavsky or Brecht from the outset" (GDR ITI 1986, 3).

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