

# Article

Work Bitch – a contemporary Lehrstück  
or how to get from I to we

# Work Bitch – a contemporary Lehrstück or how to get from I to we\*

By Tania Ørum

The play *Work Bitch* by Ida Marie Hede staged by Niels Erling at the *Sort/Hvid* Theatre in Copenhagen in January-February 2022 can be seen as a contemporary *Lehrstück* or learning play, a genre invented by Bertolt Brecht in the 1920s and 1930s. Through a series of exemplary situations Hede's play strives to diagnose the oppression and discuss the possibilities of liberation in today's society governed by capitalist realism, that is: characterised by widespread dissatisfaction and an equally widespread lack of belief in the possibility of change for the better (Fisher 2009).

As the audience enters, we are welcomed by the four actors dressed in white sportswear and knee protectors. Especially the largest of the two women smiles profusely and welcomes spectators individually as we enter and climb to our seats from where we can look out over the baby blue stage, surveyed at the far end by a large cut-out image of Britney Spears' head. Apart from the two men and two women in identical sportswear, the blue room lined by plastic curtains at the sides contains only a few pink objects, some plants and an open fridge full of cucumbers. The personal greeting at the door and the familiar sight of a well-known pop star and everyday fitness gear set the stage for intimate everyday life, immediately recognisable to most of the audience, while the colours and large head signal a pop-art environment, and the sparse objects and the four actors suggest a laboratory of stylised figures ready to demonstrate exemplary social and affective structures in late capitalist society.

The model set-up is a characteristic feature of Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, or learning plays, written between 1928 and 1934, which feature a few social types – for instance, a pilot, four agitators, a policeman, or a merchant and a coolie – and were meant to be played by a small group in order to foster discussion among the actors of the political and ethical questions raised by the plays. By staging the plays amateur actors were to learn “patterns of behaviour, stances, significant situations” (Knopf 1980 in Cohen 2021, p. 208). At a later point Brecht defined the learning play as a new type of theatrical event: “art for the producer, not the consumer” (Brecht in Cohen 2021, p. 46). The learning plays have, however, also been staged for an audience in Brecht's own time and later.

I do not intend to delve into the history or the scholarly and professional reception of Brecht's learning plays here but will focus on the relation between individual and collective that is the common theme of all the learning plays (Cohen 2021, p. 202), and a theme they share with Ida Marie Hede and Niels Erling's show.

The four actors on stage in *Work Bitch* are not social types in Brecht's sense. The class distinctions and political activists of the interwar period are not the same today. Instead of discussing long- and short-term solutions to physical hardship among workers and the ethical dilemmas of undercover revolutionary agitation, as the figures do in, for instance, *Die Maßnahme*, the four actors take turns to demonstrate the many different kinds of psychological oppression experienced today.



Photo: Tania Ørum

In the spring of 1930 Brecht and the composer Hanns Eisler had created *Die Maßnahme* as a new version of the learning play *Der Jasager* (*He Said Yes*), since according to Brecht, the confrontation between the workers' movement and fascism had made a "concretisation" of the parable-like plot of the earlier play necessary (Cohen 2021, p. 201).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the action was transferred from medieval Japan to the present among illegal revolutionaries. Both plays turn around the discussion of the individual's willingness to sacrifice his life for the common cause. The plot of *Die Maßnahme* concerns a young revolutionary who endangers the revolutionary movement in China by

1) See also Reiner Steinweg, ed., *Bertolt Brecht, Die Maßnahme: Kritische Ausgabe mit einer Spielanleitung von Reiner Steinweg* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972); see also the editors' commentary in *BFA* 3, p. 432.

succumbing to pity rather than pursuing a long-term strategy. His four comrades shoot him to avoid detection that would prevent their continued revolutionary work. The young comrade consents to his own killing because he accepts the political priorities. According to Brecht, the purpose of the play was “to show incorrect political behaviour and thereby learn correct behaviour” (BFA 24, p. 96). The play was intended for workers’ choruses. At the premiere of *Die Maßname* three hundred singers from three Berlin workers’ choruses were on stage. The learning play thus took on collective proportions and it was hoped that it would have a revolutionary potential by reaching out to the many members of the workers’ choral movement.<sup>2</sup>

Ida Marie Hede’s play can appeal to no such revolutionary context. It takes place in an ordinary theatre, although one with activist aspirations, and targets a young middle-class audience. As representatives of this audience the four actors voice the dilemmas of present-day society: the interiorisation of wage labour, the bad conscience about belonging to the privileged part of the world, the pressure to compete and perform that leads to loneliness and exhaustion, the political correctness, and gender and sexual structures of dominance. This inward turn of the “patterns of behaviour, stances, significant situations” under discussion is typical of today’s highly individualised western society where anxiety and stress loom larger than hunger and physical hardship. It also places the patterns under discussion squarely within the educated middle classes, while *Die Maßname* was aimed at working-class performers. Nevertheless, *Work Bitch* can be seen as a learning play in so far as its behavioural patterns are easily shared by a typical contemporary audience who are invited to recognise and criticise the oppressive and self-oppressive structures exemplified by the actors.

Like Brecht’s learning plays and other plays, *Work Bitch* sets off from a parable: the play takes its title from a song by Britney Spears that critiques the work pressure imposed by her guardians. When everyone has found a seat, the actors ask the audience whether we know Britney Spears. Hands are immediately raised in reply, and one audience member readily proceeds to explain how Britney Spears was put under the conservatorship of her father but was finally freed with the support of her fans.

This is the cue for the start of the play, as the four actors declare that they also want to be free – but immediately find themselves faced with the question of whom to fight to be free? Who is the enemy? This is the question *Work Bitch* invites its audience to reflect on.

Brecht’s learning plays and other plays were often intended as pedagogical and didactic processes to promote insight into the dominant oppositions in capitalist society and the dilemmas of revolutionary struggle. In Hede’s text there are also references to revolution. The French and the Russian revolutions are mentioned while the four actors ecstatically act out the grotesque fantasy of being part of an army of Britney’s fans cheering her on as she conquers the oppressors – from Marie-Toilette to Hitler. Revolutionary or collective struggle here seems to require an all-potent leader modelled on the action heroes of contemporary movies; an individual saviour supported by an audience rather than a political movement of activists. Or perhaps the sense of being part of a larger collective is mostly open to people today when they find themselves in an audience at a concert (or a football match). The imaginary struggle and victory led by Britney, however, soon evaporates, leaving the actors back where they started at the beginning of the play: today’s enemy is more intangible and diffuse, and the four people on stage constantly lapse back into the nagging feeling that problems are their own fault, something they have to “work on”.

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2) Cohen states that toward the end of the 1920s, the workers’ choral movement counted half a million members. (Cohen 2021, p.201).

Fan groups can actually be quite influential, as suggested by the case of Britney Spears that serves to launch the play. They do not necessarily limit themselves to acting in support of their chosen pop star or harassing people who criticise their idol. And they need not be passive followers only but can form activist communities as do the well-known K-pop fans, huge transnational groups of fans of Korean pop groups that since the mid-1990s have formed online networks that enable them to mobilise swiftly and efficiently.

In May 2020 K-pop supporters thus flooded a police scanner app for Dallas, Texas, with fancams, after the police department asked citizens to submit videos of protest activity. Effectively, this shut down the app, rendering it useless for the Dallas police's intended purpose of identifying protesters at a Black Lives Matter rally. And in June 2020, US president Donald Trump delivered a campaign rally in front of just 6,200 people. The stadium, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, holds 19,000, and so was notably empty, with row upon row of blue unoccupied seats; a second stadium booked up nearby for overflow went unused. Trump's campaign had bragged that more than a million people had registered to attend. A large internet group of K-pop stans (a stan is an ardent fan) had booked all the seats with the express intention of not showing up and thus ruining Trump's big day (McCurry 2020, Bedingfield 2020).

In his recent book *Speculative Communities. Living with Uncertainty in a Financialized World* Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou sees K-pop activists as examples of present-day social movements that wield a subversive or possibly even revolutionary force (Komporozos-Athanasiou 2022). Other researchers find that K-pop fans "do constitute a social movement due to their use of extra-institutional tactics" and point out that "pop culture can give those who face a lack of resources and authority a means to challenge the status quo", emphasizing K-pop fans' innovative use of social media mobilization as an ongoing social movement" (Kim and Hutt 2021).<sup>3</sup>

In Hede's play, fandom, however, does not materialise as a social movement but remains a fantasy. But the inspirational force of fan communities is clearly indicated by the play's starting point in the Britney Spears example. Before the actors can arrive at any kind of subversive or collective activity, however, they apparently have to go through an extended analysis of the subjective obstacles to liberation. This is the learning part of Hede's learning play. Perhaps it is also the primary obstacle to protest movements today?

Brecht's learning plays have often been criticised for being too schematic and simplified and their characters for having no psychological depth. As the Brecht scholar Rikard Schönström points out, this schematism must be related to Brecht's work on the relation between actors and public (Schönström 2003, p. 116). Brecht's general aim was to turn the audience from passive spectators into critical viewers by avoiding emotional identification with the characters and encouraging analytical understanding of the model demonstrations of the actors.

In Hede's text there is no general narrative. Instead, the play is divided into a number of model situations in which the four actors take turns to demonstrate various dimensions of self-oppression and the difficulties of liberation in late capitalist society. The audience clearly seem to recognise the situations just as they recognise musical quotations and references to Britney Spears. But the characters and situations remain sketches or model examples, never turning into in-depth psychological portraits of individuals, since the actors keep taking turns to embody different kinds

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3) Kim's concept of a social movement is based on John Fiske's (1992) concept of fandom as "subversive by design," Henry Jenkins' (1992) participatory fan culture framework, and Social Movement Theory (King, 2011).

of problems. This is meta-theatre, not unlike Brecht's plays. Brecht talked of *Verfremdung* – the reflective distance to the play that prevents unthinking emotional involvement in action and characters and promotes critical thinking.<sup>4</sup>

For the intellectual middle classes that Hede's play addresses and portrays, this kind of self-reflection and ironical distance have become second nature. In today's media society we inevitably see ourselves and others as mediated and represented in social media and elsewhere. Educators train children of all classes in introspection and critical self-evaluation from an early age, so that individual self-evaluation tends to precede collective action and feelings of group solidarity. As the dividing lines between physical and virtual relations are blurred in modern media society, and individual inner space looms larger than shared space, media icons like Britney Spears can feel closer and more intimate than friends and family. So perhaps critical self-reflection and ironical distance is more of an obstacle than a help in the fight for liberation today? And perhaps Brecht's model of consciousness-raising needs to be rethought for it to work on a contemporary audience?

Brecht's learning plays were inspired by contemporary agitprop theatre. Ida Marie Hede and Niels Erling's stage production is inspired by post-dramatic theatre that has clearly inherited from Brecht, among others. According to Schönström, in his learning plays Brecht wanted to distance himself from the "culinary" theatre he had flirted with in the *Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) (1928) and *Mahagonny* (1930), where satirical action and Kurt Weill's popular music had attracted a large audience (Schönström 2003, p. 114). *Work Bitch* draws on such "culinary" elements in its central use of the Britney Spears figure, her well-known songs and music, and the use of stroboscopic light and other disco effects that may recall the audience's personal memories of listening and dancing to Britney's music. In this way the show draws on the spectators' affective associations and seeks to model them into a critical reflection on today's historical realities. This use of culinary elements might be seen partly as a revision of Brecht's model theatre that might help the audience to overcome their habitual ironical distance.

The play starts out with the actors' identification with Britney as a vulnerable and oppressed person whose powerlessness and overload of work is mirrored in the actors' presentations of "Britney exercises" to help overcome sleeplessness and self-reproaches. The exercises guided by a coach named Celeste, however, are far from celestial, but veer off into grotesque self-mutilation, hacking out eyes and pulling out intestines on the road to sleep, while blaming oneself for complaining about sleeplessness and constant work and online communication, although one is actually a privileged citizen in a welfare state. Self-care is part of the duties owed to society, another workload provoking bad conscience. The actors unite in a song of "Who is my enemy/ I am looking for an enemy/ I want to have an enemy", running through a long list of possible enemies to fight and blame – from mother and father and partner to television, friends, doctors, social media and concluding with "my body and myself".

Since no external enemy can be located, the actors instead develop a fantasy of how Britney and her fans build a revolutionary ecological farm outside of capitalism. They seem to know all the relevant current theories and slogans, so the political training and consciousness-raising advocated in Brecht's plays and other agitprop theatre of the 1930s is no longer necessary. The political consciousness, however, is to no avail. Even the fantasies of revolution are inevitably undermined

4) The term *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as distancing effect or alienation effect) is rooted in Viktor Shklovsky's notion of the device of *making strange* (*приём отстранения приём отстранения*). Brecht first used the term in an essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" published in 1936.

by ironical distance and the knowledge that comes with capitalist realism that such utopian schemes will inevitably be put down. So, the imagined ecological community ends not in a utopian but a dystopian vision of collective death. As Mark Fisher has suggested, within the current neoliberal regime there seems to be no realistic alternative to capitalism, and it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Mark Fisher 2009, p. 1).

The problem here is evidently not lack of proper theory or information but lack of any kind of collective organisation in the highly individualist late capitalist societies that have convinced its members that Margaret Thatcher was right when she said that “there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families” (Thatcher 1987). As Mark Fisher has argued, this political regime of neoliberalism leads to what he terms “reflexive impotence”. If young people in Britain are politically disengaged, he says, this is a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism, but of *reflexive impotence*. They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it. But that ‘knowledge’, that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy (Mark Fisher 2009 p. 21).

The wavering between longing for the love and recognition of others and the fear and envy of others that the play diagnoses as the basic mode of subjectivity today makes it difficult to imagine a communal spirit, let alone acting in collective solidarity. It is far easier to move into a grotesque scene of cannibalism where Britney and her fans eat each other.

Although the psychosomatic problems exemplified by the actors seem sufficiently general to be readily recognised by the audience, this does not make it any easier to find shared feelings or modes of action. The “we” ecstatically addressed in the fantasies of an army of fans is nowhere to be found in any kind of credible reality.

As Mark Fisher has pointed out, the limits of capitalist realism are most visible in the growth of psychosomatic problems. Being young, he says, is “close to being reclassified as sickness”, and this “pathologisation already forecloses any possibility of politicisation”, while the privatisation of such problems rules out any question of social systemic causation (Fisher 2009, p. 21; Krause Frantzen, 2019).

Nevertheless, Hede’s text seems to link this kind of rampant pathologisation to the possibility of revolt, since the pathologies test the limits of neoliberal ideology and point to the inherent weaknesses and lack of realism in capitalist realism. There is a theme of bodily dissolution running through Hede’s play. The self-mutilating sleep exercises at the start of the play carry on from the imagined scene of Britney leaving court after having been placed in her father’s custody and literally exploding in anger until she is dissolved into “small body parts that want to find new allies and new worlds to live in”, “a mist, an army of Britney meat” that declares, “I want to start a revolution here” (Hede 2022, my translation). And at the end of the play it seems to be a bodily impulse that helps the isolated subject discard its reflexive impotence and join other bodies in a protest demonstration – carrying hand-painted slogans saying not I but “WE WILL NOT”, “WE WANT”, “OUR ANGER IS LEGITIMATE” – thus denouncing introspective self-hatred and declaring that it is society that installs these negative self-images and makes people complicit in social exploitation. In the street others turn up with slogans: “There are bodies everywhere. There are Work Bitches everywhere. As in a fairy tale structures become visible”.

Although we seem to remain in a fairy-tale mode (or learning-play mode), close to the fantasised visions of Britney’s fans, the bodies of strangers suck in the subject and “I throw myself with flesh and blood into their tissue, their cells”. The four actors shout, “We have been led to believe we are each other’s enemies”. And on the wings of a pop song the individual body melts into the other

bodies, “as if we lived in one big stew of connectedness”, wondering whether “this means that I, that we – in the moment of protest – now – maybe – are free?” (Hede 2022, my translation).<sup>5</sup>

The play thus ends on a note of collective struggle and protest, as a good anti-capitalist learning play should. Although the road out of reflexive impotence is barely sketched, and the coordination of mind and body, theory and practice, is left unclear, at least the positive vision of togetherness is less fantasised, closer to an old-fashioned demo with placards and slogans, carried by a “we”, not a solitary “I”, in the spirit of Brecht’s socialist plays.

Brecht’s plays may talk of strikes and class struggle, but in fact they are mainly about individual choices. The same goes for Ida Marie Hede’s play. This may have both a technical and an audience-related explanation. Conventional theatre, especially the small stages open to experimental drama, do not have space for the mass performance of the workers’ choruses or agitprop theatre of the interwar period or the political street theatres of the 1960s and 1970s, where entire neighbourhoods or workplaces participated.<sup>6</sup> And it is easier to engage an audience affectively or intellectually in the individual choices of a few characters than in the necessarily schematic agitprop characters.

As Ida Marie Hede’s text suggests, such mass spectacles work not through theoretical analysis, but mainly through the ecstatic feelings of bodily mass and togetherness, joined in anger or protest and encouraged by music and song. As often testified, ecstatic moments of community were experienced in the large demonstrations of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, but such collective transport may also occur in vigilante mobs and can be observed in the films of fascist rallies in the 1930s and 1940s. Maybe that is why Niels Erling did not include the melting of bodies into “one big stew of connectedness” in his staging of Hede’s text, but merely had the actors declare somewhat abruptly at the end, that it is society that creates the subjective problems experienced by its individual members.

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5) The stage version has cut the text on bodies merging in the street.

6) See Matthias Warstar’s article elsewhere in this issue.



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