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Sustaining a humanist approach in the twentieth century: George Tabori (1914-2007)

By Stefan Steinberg
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The Hungarian-born playwright George Tabori (born György Tábori) has died in Berlin, at the age of 93. He continued to work actively in theatre until the end and the head of the Berliner Ensemble theatre and Tabori's last employer, Claus Peymann, was proud to describe his friend as the oldest active director in the world. A warm, friendly man who sought close collaboration with his co-workers and actors, Tabori was held in high esteem by many of those he had worked with over a period of decades.

In the course of his turbulent life, Tabori lived through some of the most tumultuous social and political developments of the twentieth century—events and experiences which repeatedly found reflection in his work. Particularly in Germany, Tabori will be remembered as an author and playwright who repeatedly challenged his audience to address the historical legacy of fascism and the annihilation of the European Jews. His theatrical weapons were parody, his gallows humor and a readiness to provoke the attention of his audience. Tabori was capable of articulating some of the moral dilemmas and questions arising from some of the greatest crimes in history. His work falls short, however, because of the limitations of his approach.

Tabori was born in Hungary, the son of a liberal-thinking Jewish father, the year the First World War broke out. Young George left Budapest in 1932 and began working in Berlin as a waiter in a major German hotel. He moved to Berlin in a period of political upheaval just prior to the taking of power by the Nazis. Tabori recalls being in the crowd when Hitler passed by during a torch-lit night-time rally. His tale of serving Nazi leader (later Field Marshal) Hermann Göring breakfast in bed has never been verified. In any event, the young Jewish intellectual was forced to flee Germany when Hitler came to power. In his own words "Berlin wasn't big enough for Hitler and me!"

Tabori inherited the humor and humanism of his father, who demanded that every individual be treated on his or her merits. The death of his father and many of the members of his family in German concentration camps provided the trauma with which Tabori wrestled for the rest of his life. Most of his family died in Auschwitz—part of an estimated half a million Hungarian Jews to be wiped out by the Nazis in the camps. Only Tabori's mother survived—due to a small act of mercy by a German official. The incident became the basis for Tabori's autobiographical play, *My Mother's Courage*, later made into a film (1995).

Tabori went to London, worked as a journalist and joined the British army during the final years of World War II. By this time he had begun writing fiction in his free time. In 1947 Tabori emigrated to the US to work on screenplays, and shortly after his arrival in Hollywood met other exiled German writers, including Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht. His encounters with Brecht were brief but sufficient to spur Tabori's enduring interest in theatre.

Disenchanted with the impersonal manner in which Hollywood demanded and produced film scripts, Tabori spent the next two decades in the United States, working as a playwright, screenwriter, and commencing a third career as a director. Among other films, he worked on *I Confess* (1953), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, and *Crisis* (1950), directed by Richard Brooks.

His first two plays, *Fight into Egypt* and *The Emperor's Clothes*, premiered on Broadway in the early 1950s and during his period in New York, Tabori also established links with the well-known Actors Studio.

In the following decade, he increasingly adapted, translated and directed the works of modern European writers, including Brecht. In 1961 his collage piece *Brecht on Brecht* opened in the US to considerable success and was widely produced by resident and university theatres throughout the decade.

Brecht on Brecht presented Brecht in his own words at a time when the German playwright was often quoted, yet little understood. The format was simple—actors sitting on barstools in front of the enlarged picture of a smiling B.B., reading Brecht's prose and poetry, singing his songs and acting out scenes from his plays. In addition to a more general literary interest in Brecht, the success of *Brecht on Brecht* was also evidently connected to the changing political climate in the US.

Tabori's own interest in Brecht at that time was neither merely aesthetic nor collegial. At the time, Tabori wrote to Brecht's widow Helene Weigel to announce that his production was "the first show in years to have any social content."

Like Brecht himself, Tabori was also a victim of the anti-communist witch-hunt led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. In an interview later Tabori stated: " I was blacklisted. I was not a communist, but I was blacklisted. I couldn't work in TV—in the theatre there was no black list anywhere—but in TV or radio I was blacklisted. It was a very political time, the McCarthy time, we were all very political." This theme is dealt with (poorly) by Tabori in his production *The Brecht Files*.

In 1968 Tabori was invited to participate in the *Brecht-Dialog* in East Berlin, on the occasion of Brecht's 70th birthday (Brecht had died in East Germany in 1956). Tabori's trip was to pave the way for his full-time return to Europe in 1972. One of Tabori's last projects prior to his departure from the US was his play *Die Kannibalen (The Cannibals),* which was produced in 1968 at New York's American Place Theatre. Two years later Tabori also completed and presented an anti-Vietnam war play, *Pinkville* (1970).

The *Cannibals* opened to occasionally scathing and largely negative

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reviews by the US press. The play is set in the Auschwitz concentration camp and centres on the exchanges and activities of a group of camp inmates, awaiting execution. Two survivors look back at their past in the camp and in the course of the play it becomes clear why they survived—under pressure from their guards, they eat the remains of a fellow prisoner. Other prisoners who refuse to stoop so low are sent by the guard, Schrekinger, to their deaths in the gas chamber. The play is dedicated to Tabori's own father Cornelius—described with Tabori's typical black humor—as "a man with a modest appetite."

The scurrilous and frequently obscene dialogue between the inmates embraces memory, religion, prejudices and, above all, the yearning for survival—and food. Given the circumstances of the camp, the highest human (and ethical) priority is survival. The end of the play raises the issue of guilt. The two survivors meet the guard who forced their fellow prisoners into the gas chamber. The guard is forced to confront his guilt and posed the question repeatedly raised by the post-war generation of German youth—"What did you do in the war, daddy?" Schrekinger responds with a list of rationalizations, which had been repeated at length by Nazi war criminals testifying at the Nuremberg Trials and the trial of Adolph Eichmann—in particular the response, "I was only following orders."

Tabori wrote at the time, "There are taboos that must be broken or they will continue to choke us." Seeking to provoke his audience with a form of cathartic theatre, Tabori drew upon elements of the collective forms of work and disjointed narrative developed by such New York groups as the Living Theatre and Open Theatre. While the play was badly received in New York it was to provide Tabori with his first success on the German stage in 1968. His play opened in German to enthusiastic audiences and standing ovations. He was later returned to the same themes in his so-called Holocaust plays (*Jubilee, My Mother's Courage*, and the farce, *Mein Kampf*).

To his credit, Tabori never endorsed any variety of the collective guilt theory, which proclaimed that the German people in its entirety were guilty for the crimes of the Nazis. Following his return to Europe Tabori said: "I haven't found it difficult to come back. I never felt that the Germans and Austrians are guilty. I could never generalize about a nation."

In 1992 Tabori was the first non-German to be awarded the Büchner Prize, Germany's highest literary prize. At the ceremony Tabori admitted that while he did not know too many Germans he was very fond of the ones he did know. In another one of his interviews, Tabori was rather more circumspect and tongue-in-cheek about life in Germany. As a "Hungarian-born, Jewish holder of a British passport," Tabori claimed life in Germany was no problem—"as long as your papers were in order and your suitcase packed."

At the same time, Tabori avoided the role of a strictly diasporic Jewish author. In his own words, "he never considered himself Jewish until others made him a Jew." Instead Tabori claimed in an interview in 1998, that he emphatically embraced the role of "a stranger" or "a foreigner." Tabori's own irreverent treatment of the Christian and Jewish religions is contained in his *Goldberg Variations* (1991), which satirizes the Old Testament. The biblical story of Genesis to Golgotha is reduced to the status of a badly produced play directed by a bullying and objectionable God, aided by his close assistant, Goldberg.

In the last three decades of his life, Tabori opened a new chapter in his theatrical career. He wrote and directed prolifically for the major theatres in Vienna and Berlin, producing his own pieces and stage adaptations as well as directing pieces by Samuel Beckett, Kafka and Shakespeare.

In the summer of 2002,Tabori once again demonstrated his humanist leanings and directed Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Staged at three Berlin locations—a church, a synagogue, and a mosque—the opera production was Tabori's plea for religious tolerance in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

A brief review of his life and work reveals a tragic element in George Tabori's work, which largely remained hidden from the author himself. In a review of one of his more recent plays, I wrote: "Tabori's world in *The Brecht File* is one without principles, without convictions where, without exception, everyone—secret police and exiles—operates from the basest of motives."

For Tabori, the lessons of Auschwitz are that humanity—victim and perpetrator, oppressed and oppressor—can only find a common denominator at the lowest of levels. Ideals, political principles, the readiness to make sacrifices on behalf of another, have no place or merit in Tabori's universe. Failing to make any real accounting of the crimes of Stalinism in the twentieth century and the way in which the betrayal of socialist ideals by a corrupt bureaucracy was capable of paving the way for the victory of fascism, Tabori is left to conclude that survival is the best one can hope for. In this respect he shares the disillusioned outlook of other prominent figures such as Beckett.

Tabori spells out the problem in his play *The Babylonian Blues*. A group of actors seek advice about the theatre from "a not very sage sage," who responds: "This is the age of Great Confusions. We do not know where to turn—left, right or the Extreme Middle. Theatre, we are told, is no longer the Fabulous Invalid, but an unburied corpse in a whorehouse. Everything we offer is considered either *déja vu* or better-not-*vu*-at-all."

That Tabori, as a playwright, was unable to come to grips with "this confusion" is not, in the first place, his fault. Hardly anyone else of his generation did either. The political events were immensely complex and generally tragic. He was at least someone who refused to accept that the tragedy of Auschwitz was beyond comprehension or incapable of artistic representation (*à la* Adorno). Throughout his life he kept probing such events and asking questions when many others simply succumbed totally to despair.

Nonetheless, whether the obstacles are very great or not, the failure to come to grips with the fundamental social and political processes of one's epoch has its artistic and intellectual cost. Tabori perhaps saw himself as a voice crying in the wilderness, as an artist who provokes, but draws away from the consequences or logic of his art. Honorably and sincerely, he gave voice to the victims of Nazi mass murder, including many of those closest to him.

Tabori's work as a whole, however, only tends to underscore the discontinuity between his own somewhat diminished conception of "humanism" and that of an entire generation of socialist-minded intellectuals and artists, including many prominent Jewish figures at the beginning of the twentieth century—the generation of his father—whose own humanist outlook was fuelled by great ideals, including the vision of a higher form of society.

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