

History Access Reading Group

Meet with PROFESSOR BRUCE HEVLY
to discuss

Galileo, by Bertolt Brecht

Thursday, December 6, 2007

1:00–2:30, Smith 306

Paperback widely available new and used

Brecht's *Life of Galileo* is on stage in Seattle through November 18 (Strawberry Theatre Workshop, staged at Seattle University). Written by Brecht after he fled Nazi Germany for Scandinavia and first staged in Switzerland, *Galileo* was later revised into an English-language version and then produced in New York just after World War II. In the New York production, Brecht took Galileo's story into the nuclear age, connecting the relationship between the scientist and political authority in the framework of early modern capitalism to the early days of the Cold War. After being called in front of a Congressional anti-Communist investigating committee, Brecht left the U.S. for East Germany. The play had only a short run.

Study Questions on Reverse

Please sign up for this group by contacting History Undergraduate Advising:

Phone: 543-5691 or Email: histadv@u.washington.edu

Or visit our website and click on the RSVP button at:

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

Galileo is an extraordinary play; it is also representative of a class of plays that put physics on stage to engage audiences in considerations of the relationships of science, the state, and the arms race. Plays such as Herman Wouk's *The Traitor*, Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (originally written in German based on the transcripts of Oppenheimer's AEC Personnel Security Board hearing), and Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* testify to the persistence of this topic over the six decades since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Particularly interesting to me is the audience response to these plays. In particular, what do audiences take away in terms of the history of science or science itself, and why do they value it? This question is one I hope the group will be able to discuss based on our own reactions to *Galileo*.

Study Questions

Some questions to consider while reading the work:

1. Who is the chief villain of the piece?
2. How does Brecht portray the relationship between science and religion in the play? Is that the crucial dynamic in Galileo's interactions with the Church?
3. Could this play serve as evidence for the consequences of the Communist infiltration of the California entertainment industry? (The actor Charles Laughton served as Brecht's patron during the war as the play underwent revision.)
4. Is there an ideal expressed here of the proper place of science in society and of the conditions that would lead to its progress? Are such conditions possible?
5. How does the play reflect the postwar context? If you have seen or read Frayn's *Copenhagen*, for example (either in a theater or in the PBS production), how have assumptions about the scientist's social role and responsibilities seemingly changed in the fifty years between the two works?