

He Said Yes / He Said No

(1930)

by Bertolt Brecht



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capitalist control
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Socialist Stories***

Characters:

THE TEACHER

THE BOY

THE MOTHER

THE THREE STUDENTS

THE FULL CHORUS

He Said Yes

ACT ONE

I

THE FULL CHORUS:

Nothing is more important to learn than agreement.
Many can say yes; at the same time there is no agreement.
Many are not even asked, and many
May be agreeing to error. Therefore:
Nothing is more important to learn than agreement.

2

The Teacher in Space 1, the Mother and the Boy in Space 2.

THE TEACHER: I am a teacher. My school is at a temple in the town. And there I have a pupil who has lost his father; he has only got his mother to care for him. I am on my way to see them so I may say farewell to them, for I shall very soon be starting to make a journey to the mountains.¹ *He knocks at the door.* May I please come in?

THE BOY: Who is there? It's the Master who's come, the Master who has come out to see us!

THE TEACHER: Why has it been so long since you came to my classes at the temple?

THE BOY: I have not been able to since my mother fell ill.

THE TEACHER: I had no idea. Kindly tell her at once I am out here.

THE BOY *calls to Space 2*: Mother, the Master is here.

THE MOTHER *from Space 2*: Ask if he would kindly come in.

THE BOY: Kindly step through this door.

The Boy and the Teacher both enter Space 2.

THE TEACHER: It's a long time since I last saw you. Your son says you have caught the illness. Tell me now, are you better?

THE MOTHER: There's no need for you to worry because of my illness. It is a thing of no importance.²

THE TEACHER: I am glad that you say so.³ I have come here so I may say goodbye to you, because I shall be leaving shortly to make an expedition to the mountains.⁴ There is a town beyond the mountains with some outstanding teachers.

THE MOTHER: Oh, a scientific⁵ mountain-climbing! Yes, indeed; they tell me that many very famous doctors live there; but I have also been informed that it can be a dangerous pilgrimage. So do you mean to take my child there with you?

THE TEACHER: It is not a journey a young child is fit to make.

THE MOTHER: ⁶ I hope you will come back in safety, sir.

THE TEACHER: Now I must go. Farewell to you.

BOY *and* MOTHER: Farewell to you.

THE BOY: I've something to tell you.

THE TEACHER: What will you tell me?

THE BOY: That I will set out for the mountains too.

THE TEACHER:

It is as I said to your mother
This is such a difficult and
Dangerous excursion. You could not possibly
Join us. And besides:
How could you think of
Abandoning your mother's bedside?
Of deserting your mother who is not well?
You stay here! There's
No question of your coming with us.

THE BOY:

It's because of my mother's illness that
I know I must go with you, to seek out

Those doctors in the town beyond the mountains, and
Ask them for medicine and consultation.

THE TEACHER: Then I shall have to speak to your mother again.
The Teacher goes back into Space 2. The Boy listens at the door.

5

THE TEACHER: I have come back once again to tell you that your son says he intends to come with us. So I have said that he cannot leave you by yourself here, cannot leave you with your illness; that the journey's dangerous and difficult. I said it was quite impossible for him to come with us. But he replied that he has to get to the town that lies over the mountains to seek medicine for his mother's illness, and consultation.

THE MOTHER: Well, I have listened to all your words. I cannot question what my boy said to you – that he'd gladly go along with you on this dangerous mountain trip. So come in, my son!
The Boy enters Space 2.

Ever since the day when your
Father was torn from us
I've had no one else beside me.
I've never known you
Fade from my thinking or be out of my eyesight
Any longer than I'd need to
Get your breakfast
See your clothes were kept tidy, and
Look after the money.

THE BOY: It is all as you say . . . Yet there's nothing can outweigh my sense of duty as I see it.

THE BOY, THE MOTHER, THE TEACHER:

I shall (he will) make this very difficult dangerous journey
To relieve your (my, her) illness
To the town beyond the mountains
Seeking for medicine and for consultation.

THE FULL CHORUS:

They realised there was no plea
Could be strong enough to move him.
Then the Master and the mother said together
With one voice:

THE TEACHER, THE MOTHER:

O see how deeply he's agreeing!
Many will be found agreeing to error, but he
Would not give agreement to her illness, and
Insisted that illness has to be cured.

THE FULL CHORUS:

The mother said however:

THE MOTHER:

Now I have no more strength left;
If it must be, then
Go with the Master.
But be swift, but be swift
Put risk behind you and come back.

ACT TWO

The door has been removed. The right half of the acting area is filled by a raised platform, with steps leading up to it. To the left, in Space 1, a sign says 'Mountain Path'. To the right (upper level), a sign saying 'Mountain Peak'. The stage is empty.

7

THE FULL CHORUS:

The members of the expedition
 Now have reached the mountains
 And the Master is one of the climbers
 And the boy too.
 The boy was not fit for the exertions of the journey:
 He overstrained his heart
 Which longed for the order to turn back homeward.
 At dawn when he saw the peaks looming up above
 Laboriously towards the hills he
 Dragged his feet.

8

Enter in Space 1 the Teacher and the Three Students, followed by the Boy bearing a jug.

THE TEACHER: We have climbed so fast to get here. Already we're at the first hut. We will stay here a little, we'll call a halt and stay a little.

THE THREE STUDENTS: We'll obey you.⁷

THE BOY: I must tell you something.

THE TEACHER: What will you tell me?

THE BOY: That I do not feel well.

THE TEACHER: Stay! Such things may not be said by those who travel to perform a task like ours. Perhaps you are exhausted because you are not used to climbing. Lie down here and rest. Recover a little. *He mounts the platform.*

THE THREE STUDENTS: It seems that this young boy is ill with

climbing. So let us try asking the Master about it.

THE FULL CHORUS: Yes. You do that!

THE THREE STUDENTS *to the Teacher*: It seems to us that this young boy is ill with climbing. What's wrong with him? Are you so anxious about him?

THE TEACHER: He's not feeling well. Otherwise I see nothing much wrong with him. He seems exhausted by climbing. He can lie here and rest; recover from his climb.

THE THREE STUDENTS: Does this mean you are not so anxious about him?

The Teacher says nothing. Long pause.

THE THREE STUDENTS:⁸

Listen. The Master has just said

That this boy was merely tired out with climbing.

But now he is looking very strange.

Once past the hut you reach the narrow ridge.

That will call for both hands clinging on to the rock face

If one's to cross it.⁹

We cannot carry stragglers.

Should we not follow the mighty Custom and

Hurl his body down to the valley?

They call down to Space 1, holding their hands to their mouth like a funnel:

Are you ill from climbing?

THE BOY: No. You see me standing here. Would I not have sat down if I were really ill?

Pause. The Boy sits down.

9

THE THREE STUDENTS: We'd better go and tell the Master. Sir, when we asked you about the boy you told us he'd become exhausted, become exhausted with climbing. But he now is looking very strange. Also he has sat down.¹⁰ And here is something we say with dread: since ancient times the Custom has been that all those who fail the climb should be thrown into the valley.

THE TEACHER: What, you would hurl this child down into the valley?

THE THREE STUDENTS: Yes, that's what we say!

THE TEACHER: A mighty Custom, true. I tell you I cannot gainsay it. Although the Custom demands too that he who fails has to be asked if the others must turn back for his sake. I find that my heart is weighted down by pity for that creature. I shall now approach him and shall tell him tenderly of this great Custom.

THE FULL CHORUS: Yes, you do that!

THE THREE STUDENTS *standing with their faces turned towards one another*:

So now let us ask him: does he demand
That we turn back just for his sake?
But we say, suppose he does
Even so we shan't turn back
But shall hurl him into the valley.¹¹

THE FULL CHORUS:

They wanted to ask him: did he demand
That they turn back just for his sake?
But they said: suppose he did
Even so they'd not turn back
But would hurl him down to the valley.¹²

IO

The Teacher has gone down to the Boy in Space 1.

THE TEACHER: Listen to me.¹³ There's been a law here from ancient times that if anyone's taken sick on such a journey, into the valley's depths he must be hurled — which means instant death. But the same Custom prescribes that the one with the sickness be asked: should we turn back again for that reason? And moreover the Custom says that the sick man must reply: no, you should not turn back.

THE BOY: I understand.

THE TEACHER: Do you want us to turn back home for your sake?

THE BOY: No, you should not turn back.

THE TEACHER: ¹⁴ So do you want to be treated just like everyone else?

THE BOY: Yes.

THE TEACHER *calls up*: Come on down here! He says yes to me.
It's what the Custom wants him to reply.

THE THREE STUDENTS: He says yes to us. It's what the Custom
wants him to reply.

They carry the Boy up to Space 2.

You should lean your head against our arm.

Do not strain too hard.

We'll carry you carefully.

*The Three Students stand before the Boy at the further edge of
the platform, shielding him.*

THE BOY *out of view*:

I knew quite well that if I made this journey

I might forfeit my life to make it.

I was thinking of

My dear mother

That drove me on to join you.

Take then my jug

Fill it with a healing draught

Bring it to my mother

When you return home.

THE FULL CHORUS:

At that his friends took the jug

And they sighed for the ways of the world

And the bitterness of its practices

And then they threw him down.

Foot to foot they stood in a knot

Close up by the edge of the valley

And hurled him down the cliff

With averted eyes, blindly

No one guiltier than his neighbour

And clods of earth after

And likewise great flat stones they flung.

Later additions and substitutions by Brecht (not included in the 1930 piano score)

- 1 And this is because an epidemic has broken out here, and several great doctors live beyond the mountains.
- 2 **For the Mother's lines substitute:** I am sorry to say I am no better, because so far nobody knows a medicine with which to treat it.
- 3 **For the Teacher's first sentence substitute:** Something must be found.
- 4 **For his fourth sentence substitute:** Tomorrow I shall undertake a journey to the mountains, to get medicine and consultation.
- 5 **For 'scientific' substitute:** Aid
- 6 **Insert:** Good.
- 7 **Insert:** *They mount the platform in Space 2. The Boy holds back the Teacher.*
- 8 **Insert:** *to one another.*
- 9 **From here to the end of section 8 substitute:**
Let us hope he is not ill.
Since if he can go no further we shall have
To leave him here.
They call down to Space 1, holding their hands to their mouth like a funnel:
We will ask the Master.
Then the first three lines of section 9 follow, down to 'sat down'.
- 10 **From here substitute as follows for the five lines ending 'I cannot gainsay it':**
THE TEACHER: I see that he has become ill. Try to carry him across the narrow ridge.
THE THREE STUDENTS: We will try that.
Stage effect: The Three Students try to carry the Boy across the narrow ridge. The players must construct the narrow ridge out of platforms, ropes, chairs and so on, in such a way that the Three Students are able to cross it on their own, but not when carrying the Boy.
THE THREE STUDENTS: We cannot carry him cross, and we cannot stay by him. Whatever happens we must go on, as

a whole town is waiting for the medicine that we are to collect. It is a dreadful thing to say, but if he cannot walk with us we shall have to leave him lying here in the mountains.

THE TEACHER: Yes, perhaps you will. I cannot gainsay you. But I think it is right

11 For the Students' last line substitute: But shall leave him there and go further.

12 Similarly with the last line of the Full Chorus.

13 After the Teacher's 'Listen to me' at the start of section 10, substitute for his two lines down to 'Custom prescribes': Because you are ill and can go no further, we must leave you here. But it is right

14 Then substitute for the next four lines, up to the stage direction *They carry the Boy up to Space 2*, as follows:

THE TEACHER: So are you consenting that you should be left behind?

THE BOY: I will think it over. *He pauses for thought.* Yes, I am consenting.

THE TEACHER *calls from Space 1 to Space 2*: He has answered as necessity demanded.

THE FULL CHORUS *and* THE THREE STUDENTS *while going down to Space 2*: He has said yes. Go on!

The Three Students remain standing.

THE TEACHER:

Go on now, no hesitation

On towards our destination.

The Three Students remain standing.

THE BOY: Let me say something: I beg you not to leave me lying here, but to throw me down into the valley, for I am frightened to die alone.

THE THREE STUDENTS: We cannot do that.

THE BOY: Stop! I demand that you should.

THE TEACHER:

You resolved to go on and leave him there

Deciding his fate is easy

Enacting it is hard.

Are you ready to throw him down into the valley?

THE THREE STUDENTS: Yes.

Weill's new setting of passages 1 and 14 have survived and are in the Weill/Lenya Archive at Yale, but if there were new settings of the others they have been lost.

He Said No

[Note: The first nine episodes of this 'counter-play' are to all intents and purposes identical with the 1930 text of *He Said Yes*, as set by Weill and given above. The substitutions and insertions which Brecht added to this later, as noted from 1 to 14, were *not* made in *He Said No*.

There is however an entirely different episode 10, which bears no relation to the music. The whole ten-episode work therefore must be treated as a play, not an opera. The new episode 10 is as follows.]

10

The Teacher has gone down to the Boy in Space 1.

THE TEACHER: Listen to me. There's been a law here from ancient times that if anyone's taken sick on such a journey, into the valley's depths he must be hurled – which means instant death. But the same Custom prescribes that the one with the sickness be asked: should we turn back again for that reason? And moreover the Custom says that the sick man must reply: no, you should not turn back. If only I could take your place, how gladly I should die!

THE BOY: I understand.

THE TEACHER: Do you want us to turn back home for your sake? Or do you consent that you should be hurled into the valley, as the Custom prescribes?

THE BOY: *He pauses for thought.* No, I do not consent.

THE TEACHER *calls from Space 1 to Space 2*: Come on down! He has not replied in accordance with the Custom.

THE THREE STUDENTS *coming down to Space 1*: He has said no. *To the Boy*: Why have you not replied in accordance with the Custom? Whoever says A must also say B. When you were asked at the start if you would consent to whatever might happen on the journey, you replied yes.

THE BOY: My answer was wrong, but your question was more so. Whoever says A does not have to say B. He can recognise that A was wrong. I wanted to fetch medicine for my mother, but now I have become ill myself and it is no longer possible. And I want immediately to turn back, as the new situation demands. I am asking you too to turn back and take me home. Your research can surely wait. If there is indeed something to be learnt beyond the mountains, as I hope, then it can only be that in a situation like ours one has to turn back. And as for the ancient Custom I see no sense in it. What I need far more is a new Great Custom, which we should bring in at once, the Custom of thinking things out anew in every new situation.

THE THREE STUDENTS *to the Teacher*: What are we to do? What the boy says makes sense even if it is not heroic.

THE TEACHER: You must decide for yourselves. But I have to tell you that you will be the object of general laughter and disgrace if you turn back.

THE THREE STUDENTS: Is it not disgraceful for him to speak for himself?

THE TEACHER: No. I see nothing disgraceful in that.

THE THREE STUDENTS: Then let us turn back, and no laughter and no disgrace shall stop us from doing the sensible thing, nor any ancient Custom discourage us from adopting a right thought.

You should lean your head against our arm.

Do not strain too hard.

We'll carry you carefully.

THE FULL CHORUS:

In this way the friends took their friend

And founded a new Custom

And a new law

And they brought the boy back.

Side by side they walked in a knot

To confront disgrace

To confront laughter, with eyes open

None more cowardly than his neighbour.