

Life of Galileo (Leben des Galilei) was written in 1938 by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898 - 1956) and premiered in German in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1943. A modified English version called simply “*Galileo*” was written in collaboration with British actor Charles Laughton, and premiered in Los Angeles in 1947, with Laughton in the lead role. A modified version of the latter was prepared in 1974 for the American Film Theatre, with the Israeli actor Topol in the lead role. [The AFT was an experiment in ‘filmed theatre,’ stage plays filmed so as to offer a heightened sense of realism without departing from theatrical conventions].

The pre- & post-war versions differ in their treatment of science, and contrast a more optimistic view of the social benefits of Science (in keeping with Brecht’s Marxist ideology) *versus* a less optimistic view following the Soviet-German Pact at the beginning of World War II, the results of the Manhattan Project, and Brecht’s disillusionment of the Soviet Union as a worker’s paradise to recognition of its failure under Stalin.

Brecht introduced many novel theatrical practices such as *Verfremdungseffekt* (literally, “defamiliarization effect”), “[S]tripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them.” That is, a play should not present a self-contained take on the world, but rather should abstract its subject and cause the audience to reflect critically. Devices seen in *Galileo* include removal of the ‘fourth wall’ by direct address to the audience, exaggerated lighting, and use of song and placards in the manner of musical theatre.

Themes for discussion:

- 1) The play contrasts the tensions between science, politics, and religion. What are their respective motivations, and how does this bring them into conflict?
- 2) Galileo is firmly situated as a university professor. Comment on his teaching method with his young friend. His development of the telescope is historically accurate, and invites comparison with future arguments about Who Found It First? (cf. DNA structure).
 - a. Galileo: “Do you know what the Milky Way is made of?” Colleague: “No.” Galileo: “I do.”
 - b. Galileo: “I improved it.” Ludivico: “Yes. You covered it in red. I begin to see how Science works.”
- 3) At 32:00, in his meeting with the young Prince Medici, Galileo proposes to begin with observation of the moons of Jupiter (“the Medician Stars”). The Philosophers instead propose to begin with a Disputation. Compare and contrast Observation and Argument as rational methods (cf. Aristotelian philosophy as presented in 4270).
- 4) Galileo’s conflict with the Church is the best-known aspect of his life.
 - a. How does the play portray his escalating tension with the Papal hierarchy? How does it connect Cardinal Barberini and Pope Urban VIII?
 - b. The book that ran afoul of the Inquisition is [Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems](#) (1632). Why? Compare and contrast Brecht’s presentation and the historical narrative.
 - c. What is the present position of the Church on Galileo? Does it surprise you?
 - d. A former student smuggles out Galileo’s [Two New Sciences](#) (1638). What are these Sciences?

For further investigation: Brecht was investigated by the US House Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy era. Another victim was Dr J Robert Oppenheimer, the “[Father of the Atomic Bomb](#)”, who was afterwards judged a security risk largely for his perceived political views. The fates of Galileo and Oppenheimer are often compared: Heinar Kiphardt’s “*In the Matter of J Robert Oppenheimer*” (1964) uses the historical record in a Brechtian distillation of truth.