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Introduction to How Much Is Your Iron?

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Published in:
Lulu-journalen

2021

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Heberling, R. (2021). Introduction to How Much Is Your Iron? *Lulu-journalen*, (8), 2-3.
<https://www.luleabiennial.se/en/journalen/nr-8/introduktion-till-vad-kostar-jaernet>

Total number of authors:
1

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Lulu-journal

Nr.8

“How Much Is Your Iron?” A report by Agentur”

Jan 2021



Christoffer Paues, *Trio no 5 for the Popular Fronts*, 2021

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→ *Introduction to
How Much Is Your Iron?*
Rikard Heberling

The point of departure for this issue of *Lulu-journalen* is the German playwright Bertolt Brecht's one-act play *How Much Is Your Iron?* (*Was kostet das Eisen?*). The play is an allegory of Sweden's activities at the time of the outbreak of World War II. The focus is on Swedish iron ore exports, which contributed significantly to Nazi Germany's armament while Sweden declared itself neutral in the escalating conflict.

The play was written during the period when Brecht lived in Sweden between April 1939 and April 1940. Prior to that he had lived six years in Denmark, where he had come as a political refugee after the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933. In Denmark, Brecht lived with his family, the actress Helene Weigel and their two children, as well as his assistants Ruth Berlau and Margarete Steffin.

The aggressive expansionist policy pursued by Nazi Germany in 1938 made Brecht's existence in Denmark increasingly uncertain. Nazi Germany annexed Austria in March, and in October Sudetenland was incorporated from Czechoslovakia. In March 1939, additional areas were occupied in Czechoslovakia. Brecht applied for a visa in the United States, but the process was slow. Instead, he turned to Sweden. His contacts in the Swedish "Spanienkommittén" (an organization formed in solidarity with the Republican faction in the Spanish Civil War), including the author Henry Peter Matthis and the Social Democratic parliamentary member Georg Branting, helped him with the application. Sweden's restrictive refugee policy and the prevailing fear of communists were not in Brecht's favor, but eventually a visa was granted through an official invitation from the National Association of Amateur Theater and the Stockholm Student Theater. Brecht was asked to give lectures on "community theater, amateur theater, and experimental theater" and, together with Weigel, to work with amateur theater groups. In April, he traveled with his family, Berlau and Steffin, to Sweden, where they settled in Lidingö outside Stockholm.

A first version of *How Much Is Your Iron?* was completed in June 1939. During the summer, Berlau and Brecht worked on a performance of the play as part of a course for amateur theater leaders at Tollare Folkhögskola outside Stockholm.

Berlau was the director. In her memoirs, she says that Brecht found traveling to the rehearsals strenuous and therefore left the responsibility to her. The fact that Berlau spoke Danish facilitated the work since the play was to be performed in Swedish. Part of the reason why Brecht avoided rehearsals was also that his visa was conditional on him not expressing anything that could irritate the strained relations between Sweden and Nazi Germany. Given the content of the play, it is understandable that Brecht distanced himself from the performance. This is also evident in the choice to use the pseudonym John Kent – the supposed "Englishman" in the play's introduction – as the author. According to Arne Lydén, who participated in the set, the play also provoked reactions that could threaten Brecht's visa. Comments like "This is none of your business, foreigner!" could be heard from the audience. Similar views had been expressed in the Danish press a few years earlier in connection with the performance of *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, a satirical depiction of Nazi Germany and racial biology. Several critics, in both Nazi and liberal newspapers, believed that the play endangered Danish-German relations and demanded that Brecht be deported.

How Much Is Your Iron? premiered at Tollare Folkhögskola in August 1939. One of the spectators, Sture Bohlin, would later describe the performance as "slightly shocking. The actors appeared in large papier-mâché masks, pure carnival figures, which made any attempt at personal role-playing quite impossible. The intention here was that the individual actor's way of giving character to his role would not introduce any irrelevant element in the mathematically clear consequences of the conflict. The individual role did not represent any individual type of person, it represented a collective factor in the development of events."

At the same time as the play was being performed, the preparations for the war were in their final stages. On August 23, the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was signed, paving the way for the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II on September 1. Swedish iron ore exports to Nazi Germany continued until 1944.

The performance in August 1939 was the only one made during Brecht's lifetime. A draft of the play was found after Brecht's death and was not published until 1966 in *Gesamtausgabe: Stücke 13*. The edition also contains the one-act play *Dansen*, which was written around the same time as *How Much Is Your Iron?* and addressed

Denmark's relationship with Nazi Germany. In connection with occasional performances in Sweden, adaptations to Swedish have been made by, among others, Ingegerd Bergström and Gustaf Dannstedt. In Herbert Grevenius' and Ulla Olsson's interpretation, *How Much Is Your Iron?* was performed as a radio play on Swedish Radio in 1980. But a complete Swedish translation of the German original edition has so far not been available, which has motivated the present interpretation by Jörgen Gassilewski.

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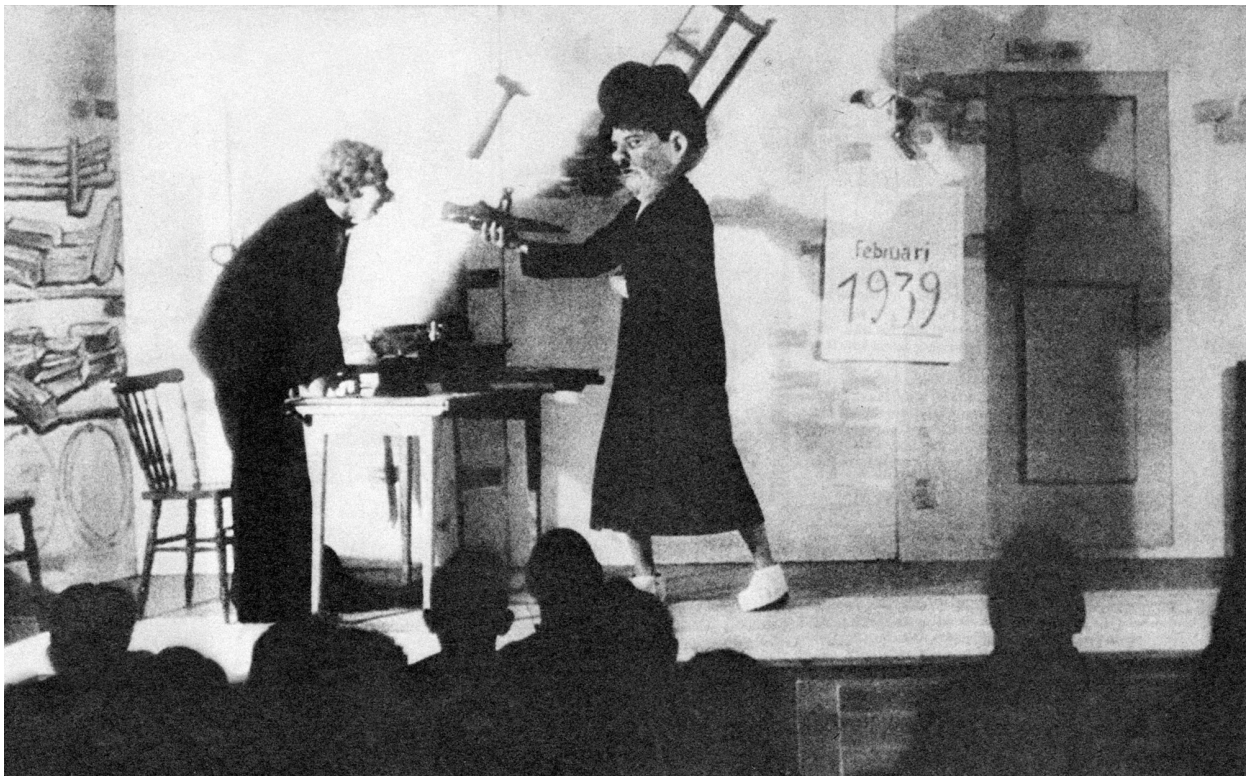
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Performance of *How Much Is Your Iron?* at Tollare Folkhögskola in August 1939. The image was originally published in *Folket i bild*, no. 50, 1959 (Erwin Leiser, "Brecht i svensk landsflykt"). Photographer unknown.