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## Brecht's BMW Escondido, California

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# brecht's bmw escondido, california mark axelrod

'Brecht arrived in Hollywood in 1941, with the help of his good friend, Lion Feuchtwanger. But while Feuchtwanger was raking in a lot of Hollywood dough, Brecht was raking banana leaves.'

Axelrod is a California-based author making regular sojourns in Europe with a rucksack full of clean underwear and a head full of literary obsessions. In his witty and doggedly inventive *Borges' Travel*, *Hemingway's Garage* (2005), from which these pieces are taken, the two things somehow coalesce...

*Anyone* who knows anything about Brecht's life knows how utterly disappointed Brecht was by failing to make the big bucks as a screenwriter in Hollywood, but what everyone doesn't know is how he finally managed to make a living while he lived there. The truth is truly stranger than fiction.

Brecht arrived in Hollywood in 1941, with the help of his good friend, Lion Feuchtwanger. But while Feuchtwanger was raking in a lot of Hollywood dough, Brecht was raking banana leaves. As a matter of fact, he was so anguished by his failure in Hollywood that he was once quoted as saying "*Jeden Morgen, mein Brot zu verdienen, Gehe ich auf den Markt, wo Lügen gekauft werden. Hoffnungsvoll, Reihe ich mich ein zwischen die Verkäufer.*" In English it doesn't sound much better, "Every morning, to earn my bread, I go to the market where lies are bought. Full of hope, I line up among the salesmen." Welcome to Hollywood.

Eventually, Brecht rented a house on 26<sup>th</sup> Street in Santa Monica about which he wrote, "...[it was] one of the oldest, is about 30 years old, California clapboard, whitewashed, with an upper floor with 4 bedrooms. I have a long workroom (almost 7 meters), which we immediately whitewashed and equipped with 4 tables. There are old trees in the garden (a pepper tree and a fig tree). Rent is \$60 per month. \$12.50 more than in 25<sup>th</sup> Street." Meanwhile, in Pacific Palisades, Feuchtwanger was living in the Villa Aurora which even by today's standards is considered opulent. The disparity grated on Brecht who couldn't reconcile how Hollywood valorized the mediocre and relegated intellect to penury.

During his first year in Hollywood, Brecht came up with a number of ideas for screenplays and wrote a number of scripts, including *Joe Fleischhacker*, a collaboration with screenwriter, Ferdinand Reyher. Brecht also worked with Fritz Lang and later with screenwriter, John Wexley. The two of them worked ceaselessly for two months on the final script, but what Brecht discovered 60 years ago works much the same way today. That is, most of what he wrote was discarded and none of his contributions ever got him a film credit. He discovered that Hollywood was not Berlin and wit and intellect were little match in a market that was predicated on glitz. To that end, Eisenstein's words ring true. (See: *Eisenstein's Café*).

Enter Hemingway. By accident, Brecht's car broke down in Santa Ana while on a weekend outing to Laguna Beach. As fate would have it, AAA towed the car to Hemingway's Garage (see *Borges' Travel, Hemingway's Garage*) when Hemingway himself showed up. Coincidentally,

Hemingway was also on his way to Laguna Beach to look for property to purchase for a café. While they worked on his car, Hemingway and Brecht had breakfast at DaVinci's Restaurant and after Brecht relieved himself of all that troubled him about being a screenwriter, Hemingway suggested that he "Fuck Hollywood and the screenwriters" since "they're all Jews anyway." He went on to say, "You can make some decent dough selling BMWs in Southern California and if you play your cards right, get laid in the process." (1)

Brecht didn't think much about the idea since he was practically broke, but Hemingway said he'd help bankroll the business. So the oddest couple of all, (2) Hemingway and Brecht, opened Brecht BMW in the fall of 1942. Brecht managed the business for several years making enough money to return to Switzerland in 1947 the day after his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee on 30 October 1947. Before he left the US, he opined that he was saddened by the fact the HUAC didn't interrogate him on Halloween since "what better day to carry out a witch hunt." (3)

Though he sold his share of the franchise shortly before he left the country, the dealership remains in his name today and can be found in Escondido, California.

(1) *From Carburetors to Carbohydrates: Hemingway's Orange County Businesses*. I.M. Slavish. Newport Beach, CA: OC Publishing, 2001. Hemingway was alluding to the wealthy, widowed Orange County women who preferred BMW to Mercedes; however, what Hemingway didn't know then, but was to learn later, was that Brecht "liked to hit from both sides of the plate."

(2) The Hemingway-Brecht relationship was the initial idea behind the Matthau-Lemmon film, *The Odd Couple*, directed by Gene Saks, written by Neil Simon.

(3) *Bluster & Bull Shit: Brecht's Hollywood Diaries*. Kurt Weill. Boston: Harvart Press, 1949.