

BRECHTIAN THEATRE

Palwe Dattprasad Dnyandeo
Department of English,
Babuji Avhad Mahavidyalaya,
Pathardi, Dist- Ahmednagar

Epic theatre was a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20th century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners, including Erwin Piscator, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and, most famously, Bertolt Brecht. Although many of the concepts and practices involved in Brechtian epic theatre had been around for years, even centuries, Brecht unified them, developed the style, and popularized it. Epic theatre incorporates a mode of acting that utilizes what he calls *gestus*. The epic form describes both a type of written drama and a methodological approach to the production of plays: "Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name 'epic'." Brecht later preferred the term "dialectical theatre" which he discussed in his work "A Short Organum for the Theatre". One of the goals of epic theatre is for the audience to always be aware that it is watching a play: "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion."

Epic theatre was a reaction against popular forms of theatre, particularly the naturalistic approach pioneered by Constantin Stanislavski. Like Stanislavski, Brecht disliked the shallow spectacle, manipulative plots, and heightened emotion of melodrama; but where Stanislavski attempted to engender real human behavior in acting through the techniques of Stanislavski's system and to absorb the audience completely in the fictional world of the play, Brecht saw Stanislavski's methodology as producing escapism. Brecht's own social and political focus departed also from surrealism and the Theatre of Cruelty, as developed in the writings and dramaturgy of Antonin Artaud, who sought to affect audiences viscerally, psychologically, physically, and irrationally.

The Basics of Epic Theatre

The epic invites calm, detached contemplation and judgment; the dramatic overwhelms reason with passion and emotion, the spectator sharing the actor's experiences. Brecht's objection to "Aristotelian" theatre was an objection to Goethe's and Schiller's interpretation of it - an objection to:

- catharsis by terror and pity
- identification with the actors
- illusion - the attempt to represent the present event

Brecht's idea of epic is informed by the ideas of Goethe and Schiller regarding the mood and character of epic poetry - this is a rational, calm detachment, to which Brecht aspires as a playwright. *"...the epic poet presents the event as totally past, while the dramatic poet presents it as totally present."*

Dramatic Theatre vs. Epic Theatre

Brecht criticizes what he calls "Culinary theatre". This is theatre which merely gives an experience, mental refreshment as a meal is a bodily restorative. Brecht despises theatre which provides mental foodstuffs but makes no difference to audience. He believes that the audience should be made not to feel, but to think. (Note that Brecht supposes these two to be in opposition to each other - but this need not be so: Shakespeare at his best can challenge the head and the heart.) Dramatic theatre presents events:

- from the hero's viewpoint (distorting judgment,) and
- as happening now (preventing calm detachment.)

To counter this, the illusion must be broken. Theatre must do this continually. And, therefore, the audience must be made aware that events are not present events (happening now), but past events being represented as narrative, with commentary provided to encourage our own reflection. This is not unlike the experience of reading a book with critical notes in the margin, or as if a novelist supplied his own comment on a page facing that bearing the narrative. Some modern anti-novelists have done this. The audience is intended to sit back, relax (hence Brecht's wish for smoking!) and reflect, as did hearers of bards in classical Greece or Anglo-Saxon England. The theatre of illusion creates a spurious present, pretending things are happening now. But the epic theatre is historical: the audience is continually reminded that epic theatre gives a report of events.

The Verfremdungseffekt (Veffekt)

To discourage audience from identifying with character and so losing detachment, the action must continually be made strange, alien, remote, separate. To do this, the director must use any devices that preserve or establish this distancing. While the general use of these is called the V-effekt, when any such device is employed successfully Brecht calls the result a V-effekt. This is Brecht's explanation of how the device works:

A child whose mother remarries, seeing her as wife not just mother, or whose teacher is prosecuted, seeing him in relation to criminal law, experiences a V-effekt. These are examples from Brecht's own plays:

- In *Life of Galileo* a long and profound speech by the unheroic protagonist is followed by the bathetic observation: "Now I must eat". This shows the weakness of the man against the strength of the inventor.
- In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* when Grusche ponders whether or not to take the abandoned baby her dilemma is voiced by the Chorus while she enacts a dumb show.
- In *The Good Person of Sezuan* the frequent asides to the audience also achieve a Veffekt.

The Gestus

This is Brecht's term for that which expresses basic human attitudes - not merely "gesture" but all signs of social relations: department, intonation, facial expression. The Stanislavskian actor is to work at identifying with the character he or she portrays. The Brechtian actor is to work at expressing social attitudes in clear and stylized ways. So, when Shen-Te becomes Shui-Ta, she moves in a different manner. Brecht wished to embody the "Gestus" in the dialogue - as if to compel the right stance, movement and intonation. By subtle use of rhythm pause, parallelism and counterpointing, Brecht creates a "gestic" language. The songs are yet more clearly "gestic". As street singers make clear their attitudes with overt, grand but simple gestures, so, in delivering songs, the Brechtian actor aims to produce clarity in expressing a basic attitude, such as despair, defiance or submission. Instead of the seamless continuity of the naturalistic theatre, the illusion of natural disorder, Brecht wishes to break up the story into distinct episodes, each of which presents, in a clear and ordered manner, a central basic action. All that appears in the scene is designed to show the significance of the basic "Gestus". We see how this works in *Mother Courage*. Each scene is prefaced by a caption telling the audience what is to be the important event, in such a way as to suggest the proper attitude for the audience to adapt to it.

The Construction of the Plays

In order to achieve unity of action, to build suspense, and sustain its naturalistic illusion the dramatic play must be taut, well made and leading to a climax of catharsis. The epic play is more free. Suspense is not needed, and the whole can be loosely knit and episodic - each part making sense on its own. The later, mature plays do lead to some definite end: Mother Courage's loss of all her children, Azdak's judgement in favour of Grusche or the non-solution of the gods to Shen-Te's problem. But we can isolate episodes that stand alone - *Mother Courage* being the most simply episodic of the later plays. In an earlier piece, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* this episodic structure is much more marked. The "play" is, in fact, a series of related sketches on the theme suggested by the play's title. The work started off as five playlets, became eight, then nineteen, grew to twenty-seven and was, at last, cut to twenty-four. In performance one could (and, perhaps, should) present a selection from the total without harm to the work's integrity.

Brecht's Theory of Acting

Brecht's view is that actor should not impersonate, but narrate actions of another person, as if quoting facial gesture and movement. "The Brechtian style of acting is acting in quotation marks." Brecht uses the example of an accident-eyewitness. To show bystanders what happened, he may imitate, say, the victim's gait but will only quote what is relevant and necessary to his explanation. Moreover, the actor remains free to comment on what he shows.

Nonliterary Elements: Décor, Music and Choreography

These are no longer auxiliaries to text, reinforcing it - they stand alone or in opposition. Songs are not used to heighten emotion at moments of climax; they serve as commentaries, generally leading to a V-effekt - thus lyrics may be wry and humorous, melodies may be jazz-influenced, jerky and unromantic, or songs may satirize popular sentiment. (There is great irony in the way the public at large missed the satire in *The Threepenny Opera*, and the songs - such as Mackie Messer/Mack the Knife - became popular classics, though Brecht had intended them as send-ups.) Stage designers, no longer tied to illusion, can supply non-realistic extra decor to provide background material:

- in *Galileo* projections of maps, documents and Renaissance art works
- in *Mother Courage and Her Children* captions of celebrated events of the Thirty Years War and a statement of what is to happen next, on stage, to Mother Courage In the first production of

Mahagonny a scene in which a glutton eats himself to death was enacted before a backdrop showing a portrait of him in the act of eating - so the episode is shown twice!

Set and Lighting

Brecht believed the stage should be brightly lit at all times; special effects to create mood were not allowed. (Logically, he could have allowed it, if accompanied by some device to draw attention to it - such as a statement from a character.) The sources of light should be plainly visible - just as those over a boxing-ring (Brecht's comparison). The curtain is to be used for the display of titles, captions or comments. Placards may be placed in the auditorium, bearing instructions, such as "Don't stare so romantically" (from *Drums in the Night*). The set behind the curtain is suggestive, not realistic; that is to say, while very authentic props may be used, (as, say, Mother Courage's handcart) there will be no elaborate arrangement of these in a naturalistic stage set. The music, too, must have a visible source - musicians may even be on the stage. Interruptions for songs are announced or indicated by projection of a title, or flags and trumpets will descend from the flies.

References

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