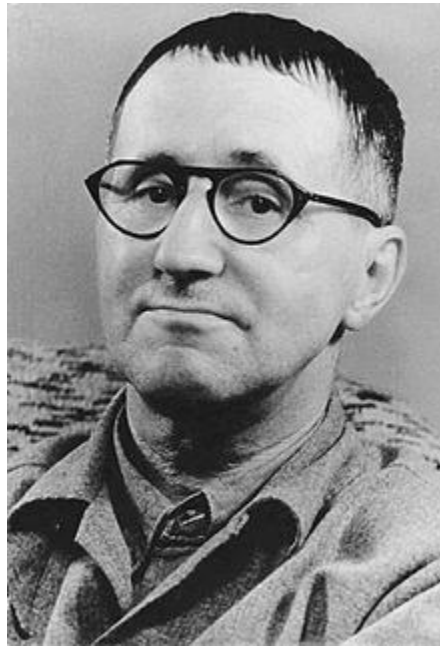


Purpose and Function of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre

Dr. Hemant Kumar Shukla and Dr. D.R. Purohit



Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht

Abstract:

The present investigation is an attempt to assess and discuss the purpose and function of Epic Theatre in the light of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's theories and practices. He was of the view that the conventional, orthodox theatre was incapable of presenting his straightforward and progressive views. Brecht disliked the shallow spectacle, manipulative plot, and heightened emotion of melodrama. In his view dramatic theatre carried away the audience with emotions, stopping them to make use of their intellect. He wanted to inform, educate and enlighten his audience. He found Epic Theatre suitable for his objective because it assumes that the purpose of a play, more than entertainment or the imitation of reality, is to present ideas and invites the audience to make judgments on them.

Key Words: *Verfremdungseffekt, Circus Arena, dramatic theatre, Epic Theatre, Lehrstück, gest, Ostranenie*

Social and Political stance of Brecht

Martin Esslin explains the purpose and intention of ‘epic’ theatre saying that “the audience is to be confronted with a body of evidence from which it is to draw its conclusions in a critical, highly lucid state of mind. The emotions are to be involved only at a further remove.” The critical analysis of the social facts, he continues “presented in the concrete form of living pictures, is to produce socially useful emotions such as indignation at injustice, hatred of oppressors, or an active desire for the overthrow of the existing social order.”¹

Brecht writes:

Telling the truth seems increasingly urgent. The Sufferings are greater and the number of sufferers has grown. Compared with the vast sufferings of the masses it seems trivial and even despicable to worry about petty difficulties and the difficulties of petty group.²

At another place, he says that it is in the interest of the people, the broad working masses, that literature should give them truthful representations of life.³

The above-mentioned statements of Brecht reflect his social and political stance pertaining to the critical state of the common people which motivated him to initiate thinking about a new kind of theatre capable of providing these people ‘**truthful representation of life**’, and that was ‘Epic Theatre’.

Berliner Ensemble

Brecht founded ***Berliner Ensemble*** with the following objectives of the Epic Theatre Productions,

1. To portray society as alterable.
2. To portray human nature as alterable.
3. To portray human nature as dependent upon the class to which it belongs.
4. To portray conflicts as social conflicts.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:12 December 2016

Dr. Hemant Kumar Shukla and Dr. D.R. Purohit

Purpose and Function of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre

5. To portray characters as genuine contradictions
6. To portray the development of the characters, situations and events as discontinuous, full of leaps and bounds.
7. To make the dialectical method of looking at things pleasurable.
8. To capture the achievements of classics in a didactic sense.
9. To establish unity between realism and poetry.⁴

A Practical Theatre

Brecht's is a **practical theatre**, a means to an end; its beauty must spring from function, from its role in the business of living. Nothing could be more alien to it than an aesthetic experience as an end in itself. But from the mid-thirties onward, Brecht tries not to reduce theatre to a series of dry-as-dust demonstrations. To see possible improvements for the world, to hope for their realization, to plan for them, to realize something of what makes the world what it is and of one's own role in important processes. Learning, Brecht points out, can be a pleasure, provided it is not only buying knowledge in order to resell it later; so "theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse."⁵

Assumptions of Epic Theatre

Epic Theatre assumes that the purpose of a play, more than entertainment or the imitation of reality, is to present ideas and invites the audience to make judgments on them. Characters are not intended to mimic real people, but to represent opposing sides of an argument, archetypes, or stereotypes. The audience should always be aware that it is watching a play, and should remain at an emotional distance from the action; Brecht described this ideal as the *Verfremdungseffekt*--variously translated as 'Alienation Effect' or 'Estrangement Effect'. It is the opposite of 'the suspension of disbelief'.⁶ Brecht writes, "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from (Epic Theatre) the engendering of illusion"⁷

A Reaction against Other Popular Forms of Theatre

Epic Theatre was largely a reaction against other popular forms of theatre, particularly the realistic drama pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski. Like Stanislavski, Brecht disliked the shallow spectacle, manipulative plot, and heightened emotion of melodrama; but whereas Stanislavski attempted to mirror real human behavior through the techniques of his Stanislavski System, and to immerse the audience totally into the world of the play, Brecht saw this as another form of escapism. The social, political focus of epic theatre was also a departure from the radical theories of Antonin Artaud, who sought to transport audience on an entirely non-rational level.⁸

By abandoning the pretence that the audience is eavesdropping on actual events, by openly admitting that the theatre is a theatre and not the world itself, the Brechtian stage approximates to the lecture hall to which audiences come in the expectation that they will be informed, but also to the **circus arena**, where an audience, without identification or illusion, watches performers exhibit their special skills. What distinguishes the theatre from the lecture room or the circus, however, is the fact that it produces living illustrations of historical or imaginary happenings among human beings.⁹

That's the reason that theatre continues to be instructive as long as it's capable enough to amuse the audiences.¹⁰ The pleasure which his theatre was now permitted to give was the pleasure we feel when we discover new truths, the exhilaration we experience when we enlarge our understanding. In this scientific age, Brecht wanted his audience to experience some of the exaltation felt by the scientist who has uncovered one of the mysteries of the universe. For Brecht, whose own curiosity and thirst for knowledge were boundless, regarded the instinct of inquiry as a social phenomenon not less pleasurable, nor less imperious, than the instinct of procreation.¹¹

Epic Theatre versus Old Dramatic Theatre

As has already been mentioned that Brecht's '**Epic Theatre**' is opposed to the old '**dramatic theatre**'; for the traditional form of drama, with its exposition, climax and denouement, it substitutes a loose sequence of scenes, each of which is self-contained. The

general implications of the action are emphasized by means of posters, projections and direct apostrophe of the audience. In keeping with these methods of production, different styles of acting are required: the actor must himself or send the audience **'into a trance'**; instead of identifying himself with his part, he must demonstrate it. The spectator on the other hand, instead of being emotionally involved, must follow the action cool-headedly; **he must not 'sympathize' but 'judge'**, he must take sides and reach a rational conclusion.¹²

The aesthetic theories are subordinated to a single purpose-the 'activation' of the spectator, in other words, the propagation of Marxist doctrine. All the plays of Brecht's maturity are merely parables designed to illustrate this doctrine. The subordination of artistic values to political objects implied the conscious renunciation of those poetic qualities which distinguished his earlier, pre-Marxist writings.¹³

Modeling Characters and Situations on Patterns of Human Behavior

By modeling characters and situations on patterns of human behavior in the light of behaviouristic psychology, he thought to emphasize the scientific nature of his work and make plain his anti-metaphysical stance. Similarly, to prevent the spectator from wallowing in the pleasure of having his emotions aroused and satisfied, the actors-and thus the author-have to address the audience directly. The spectator must be instructed about the real i.e. the social and historical, causes of the events which he is seeing, and ultimately, **he must be stirred to action.**¹⁴

Brecht used comedy to distance his audiences from emotional or serious events and was heavily influenced by musicals and fairground performers, putting music and song in his plays. Acting in epic theatre requires actors to play characters believably without convincing either the audience or themselves that they are truly the characters. Actors often address the audience directly out of character and play multiple roles.¹⁵ Brecht thought that it was important that choices the characters made were explicit and tried to develop a style of acting wherein it was evident that the characters were choosing one action over another. For example, a character could say, "I could have stayed at home, but instead I went to the shops."¹⁶

He experienced the functioning of epic theatre in such a way:

The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on the stage by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations, by figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear-but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.¹⁷

Spectator

He further elaborates that the spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play.¹⁸

The spectators of Epic theatre are poles apart from that of dramatic theatre.

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too-Just like me-It's only natural-It'll never change-The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable-That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world-I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh. While **the epic theatre's spectator says:** I'd never have thought it-That's extraordinary, hardly believable-It's got to stop-The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary-That's great art; nothing obvious in it-I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.¹⁹

Apparently, the spectator of epic theatre is expected to be more accountable and concerned in terms of social and political consciousness.

Role of Epic Theatre

Brocket sums up the role of Epic theatre: “Epic Theatre sees the ultimate effect of drama as occurring outside the theatre. The play stirs up thought and incites the spectator to act for desirable social reforms. In this way, it escapes becoming an opiate and assumes a vital and productive role in men’s lives.²⁰ That is what Brecht expected from the theatre.

The Columbia Encyclopedia has given the Hallmarks of ‘Epic theatre’ as:

- Socio-economic basis for theatre as spectacle, subject matter, and audience involvement.
- Plays/production style as commentary on society; goal is to instigate social change.
- Author as producer, as maker as of any other product.
- Destroy the theatrical illusion.
- Dialectical theatre: discordant, jarring elements (music v. text or commentary by actors, for example) as a way of exploring ideas and man’s contradictory nature. In theory, Brecht’s plays are ‘anti-illusionist’.
- Instead, Brecht’s goal (supported by much theoretical writing) is for the spectator to be involved in the theatrical event-to observe objectively, ponder, and develop critical detachment leading to social action.
- Among other practices, Brecht developed the *Verfremdungseffekt* or ‘Alienation-effect’. *Ostranenie* (making strange) to get at what Viktor Shklovsky calls the ‘literary effect’ and Piscator in fact developed the first epic theatre model.

Other Brechtian Techniques and Practices

According to the same encyclopedia, Other Brechtian Techniques and practices include:

- Signs, placards or projections which tell us what’s going to happen before each scene, to disrupt the illusion, give us a context or message on which to base our observations.
- Masks and puppetry

- Visible stage machinery (exposing the technology of theatre).
- To lessen this pedagogical rigor, Brecht devised the term ‘parable play’ (German *Lehrstück*, literally ‘teaching play’).
- Use of music to interrupt and comment on action.
- Acting exercise to induce the ‘alienation effect’.
- Acting in third person.
- Having actors describe their moves and gestures outside the written dialogue.
- Exploring the ‘gest’ of character. Gest meaning both gesture and gist. Actors are encouraged to explore ‘characteristic gestures’ which sum up a character or a situation or an emotion (eschewing clichés of behavior to induce empathy or illusion.”²¹

Thus, Brecht created an influential theory of theatre-the epic theatre-that proposed that a play should not cause the spectator to identify emotionally with the characters or action before him or her, but should instead provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view of the action on the stage.²²

Notes and References

¹Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963), p. 201.

² Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 107.

³ *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴ Anjala Maharishi, *A comparative Study of Brechtian and Classical Indian Theatre* (New-Delhi: National School of Drama, 2000), p. 69.

⁵ Alfred D. White, *Bertolt Brecht’s Great Plays* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), p. 27.

⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/epictheatre>.

⁷*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 121.

⁸<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/epictheatre>.

⁹Martin Esslin, pp. 111-12.

¹⁰*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 73.

¹¹Martin Esslin, p. 112.

¹²H.F. Garten, *Modern German Drama* (London: Methuen & Co., 1964), p. 206.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁴Hans Reiss, *The Writer's Task from Nietzsche to Brecht* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), p.153.

¹⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/epictheatre>.

¹⁶*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 122.

¹⁷<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ger342/brechtet.htm>.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰Oscar G. Brocket, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p.313.

²¹ *Columbia Encyclopedia*.

²²*TFD.Research Machine pic 2009. Helicon Publishing@egoogle.*



Dr. Hemant Kumar Shukla
Associate Professor in English
M.B. Govt. P.G. College Haldwani (Nainital)
Uttarakhand-263139
India
hemantkumar.shukla1@gmail.com

Dr. D.R. Purohit
Head of the Department
Department of English
Garhwal University Srinagar-Garhwal
Uttarakhand
India
badri_supreme@yahoo.com