THE BOOK OF BERTOLT BRECHT AND HIS THEATRICAL STYLE (EPIC THEATRE) AND THE RELATED THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS

(NON NATURALISM)

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”

— Bertold Brecht
Hallmarks of Epic Theatre Include:

- Socioeconomic basis for theatre as spectacle, subject matter, and audience involvement
- Plays/production style as commentary on society; goal is to instigate social change.
- The spectator (rather than the audience) to be involved in the theatrical event—to observe objectively, ponder, develop critical detachment leading to social action. Brecht said that “the essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason.”
- 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. Didacticism is the instruction or teaching of a moral lesson. Brecht’s plays are didactic in that they all serve to teach the audience or send a message about certain aspects of society, politics or economy. In Mother Courage and Her Children, specifically, the didacticism lies in the contradictions of the characters and how their choices have affected their lives and the value of it. The idea that Mother Courage is driven by making money and not taking care of her children is shocking to the audience. Whenever her children need her she is making a business deal. Her actions make the audience question: how much is life really worth? How much am I like Mother Courage? What would I change or do differently? The play teaches a lesson about society, economy and politics and wrestles with these throughout the play.
- In theory, Brecht’s plays are “anti-illusionistic.” Can be seen as a reaction to theatre of the late nineteenth century, with its emphasis on entertainment (spectacle), realism or escapist entertainment (farce and melodrama)

Epic Theatre

Epic Theatre is the term used generally to describe Brecht’s theory and technique. His plays were ‘epic’ in that the dramatic action was episodic - a disconnected montage of scenes, non-representational staging, and the ‘alienation effect’. All elements contribute to Brecht’s overall purpose which was to comment on the political, social and economic elements that
affected the lives of his characters. In Brecht on Theatre he outlines the differences between Epic and Dramatic Theatre as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dramatic Theatre</th>
<th>Epic Theatre</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicates the spectator in a stage situation</td>
<td>Turns the spectator into an observer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wears down his capacity for action</td>
<td>Aroused his capacity for action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provides him with sensations</td>
<td>Forces him to take decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Picture of the world</td>
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<tr>
<td>The spectator is involved in something</td>
<td>He is made to face something</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>Argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instinctive feelings are preserved</td>
<td>Brought to the point of recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience</td>
<td>The spectator stands outside, studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The human being is taken for granted</td>
<td>The human being is the object of the enquiry</td>
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<tr>
<td>He is unalterable</td>
<td>He is alterable and able to alter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eyes on the finish</td>
<td>Eyes on the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One scene makes another</td>
<td>Each scene for itself</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Montage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linear development</td>
<td>In curves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evolutionary determinism</td>
<td>Jumps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Man as a fixed point</td>
<td>Man as a process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thought determines being</td>
<td>Social being determines thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>Reason</td>
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</tbody>
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Taken from: Willet, J. Brecht on Theatre. Eyre Methuen, London, 1974

Brecht rejected the concept of a unified production or “total theatre” since it intended to make music, scenery, lighting, costume, and acting (and singing) all convey the same impression (illusion). Brecht wanted each element to comment in a different way. In a satirical song, for example, the music need not be satirical since the words or acting might convey that quality. Rather, by contradicting expectations and by juxtaposing (put two contrasting ideas/images/moods next to each other) two contrary moods, it could create conflict in the mind of the spectator and force him/her to reconcile the two elements. Hence, the term “dialectical”.

Brecht conceived the alienation effect not only as a specific aesthetic program but also as a political mission of the theatre. Inspired by the philosophies of G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx, Brecht regarded his method as a way of helping spectators understand the complex nexuses of historical development and societal relationships. It is a form of theatre based on the principle of using live performance as a means of social and political commentary. It is often described as anti-realism, because it does not make an attempt to portray life as it is, but rather uses the medium of theatre to present arguments and social ideas.

By creating stage effects that were strange or unusual, Brecht intended to assign the audience an active role in the production by forcing them to ask questions about the artificial environment and how each individual element related to real-life events. In doing so, it was hoped that viewers would distance themselves emotionally from problems that demanded intellectual solutions.
Brecht and other proponents believe that the key concept of Theatre of Alienation is that the audience views the play critically. Unlike the Stanislavski system of realism, Theatre of Alienation plays seek to destroy any possibility of escapism. Rather than leaving it up to the audience to understand what a character's motivation for action is, Theatre of Alienation tries to make their choices explicit and vocal. Characters frequently mention other things they chose not to do so they could do a particular action. This acting and writing technique seeks to prevent assumptions about the humanity of the characters. Theatre of Alienation tries to show that the characters are not people; they are ideas and expressions of themes. Nowadays, Brecht’s techniques are often used with more emotional acting, but it still may be exaggerated to emphasise the points/themes/issues the play and the characters are making.

Bertolt Brecht’s Alienation techniques – the Theatrical Conventions of Epic Theatre

ARTICLE from the Encyclopædia Britannica

Strictly speaking, ‘epic’ is an Aristotelian term for a form of narrative that is “not tied to time’, whereas a ‘tragedy’ is bound by the unities of time and place. Often, Epic plays are a disconnected montage of scenes.

Alienation effect (i.e. don’t take anything for granted, look beyond the obvious), also called ‘a-effect’ or ‘distancing effect’, (in German - Verfremdungseffekt or ‘V-effekt’).

This is the idea central to Brecht’s Dramatic theory. It involves the use of techniques designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performance.

Verfremdungseffekt/Alienation Technique

Verfremdungseffekt can be most accurately translated as the 'making strange effect', and it seeks to do precisely that; to make the familiar strange, to give everyday events the status of something grand or epic. The ‘Alienation Effect’ was developed by Brecht in the 1920’s and 30’s. It is a technique which ‘estranges’ the audience and forces them to question the social realities of the situations being presented in the play. Brecht achieved this by breaking the illusion created by conventional plays of the time. He believed that the 'suspension of disbelief' created by realistic drama was a shallow spectacle, with manipulative plots and heightened emotion. This theatre is a form of 'escapism' and did not challenge the audience at all. Rather than feel a deep connection to the characters Brecht believed that an emotional distance should be maintained. It is only when this happens, that the audience can effectively critique and evaluate the struggle between the characters and understand the social realities of the narrative. This is evident in Mother Courage and Her Children when we see Mother Courage singing a lullaby to her daughter Kattrin and then later paying for her funeral without any emotion. The ambivalence and irony of the characters, particularly Mother Courage is what is so alienating about the play. We find ourselves constantly questioning the role of Mother Courage. What kind of mother is she? Why is she called Courage? How is she courageous?
The audience questions the presentation they see before them, which is exactly what Brecht wanted his audience to do.

Brecht on the Verfremdungseffekt:

- “To alienate an incident or a character means to take from that incident or character what makes it obvious, familiar or readily understandable, so as to create wonderment and curiosity.”
- “Related to Russian Formalism, and Viktor Shklovsky’s use of the word ostranenie, “making strange,” or “defamiliarisation.”
- “The classical and medieval theatre alienated its characters by making them wear human or animal masks; the Asian theatre even today uses musical and pantomimic A-effects.”
- “To replace the [conflicts] of the classical theatre with contradictions of the modern theatre.” (Sartre) In essence, to foster a scientific approach to the work which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.

BERTOLT BRECHT’S ALIENATION TECHNIQUES

- Breaking the fourth wall
- Flashbacks
- Stepping out of role and commenting on the action that has, or is about to, happen
- Chant/ song/poetry to highlight or explain action or significant moments or convey a message
- Frozen images at points of tension (sophisticated use of freeze frames)
- Scream
- Chorus
- Transformation of object, time, place, character
- Symbolic gesture
- Symbolic movement
- Sing-song voice
- Map demonstrating journey or character changes
- Rapping as a chorus
- Miming out of sync. to a voice-over
- Live camera on character
- Flags – to show changes in destination
- Vocal sound effects – to disrupt, create place, set mood
- Third person anticipating action
- Acrobatics
- Aural and visual collages
- Use of signs to describe scene or indicate place or time or action
- Narrator (speaking directly to the audience) to give information about plot, character, setting period, events
- Placards and/or signs to give information about plot, character, setting period, events
- Non mechanical sounds
- Choral chants
- Use of Symbolic/fragmentary costume
- costume
- Monologues
- Asides
- Video/ Pre-recorded video/film in background/ OH transparencies/ Slides
- (use of projection to convey a message)
- Talking heads
- Visible technology (e.g. sound equipment/band in full view) and/or stage machinery
- Stylised movement
- Stylised dialogue
- Time jumps
- Non-linear time sequence
- Character changes on stage
- Symbols
- Music to change time and mood or contrast with the action
- Use of mask – duel characters, emotionless faces, stock characters
- Segments of poetry
- Action summaries by character or actor stepping out of character
- T-shirt prints
- Advertising slogans
- Slow motion/fast motion summary (applying fast summary to slow action rhythm)
- Distortion/contradiction of time
- Storyboards
- Use of space – distance between characters in contrast to the emotional impact
- Lectures – about social conditions, to teach, to instruct
- Character speaks both options for future action
- Repeat a scene
- Stillness and silence
- Use of multiple time frames
- Actor playing multiple roles
- Open white stage lights (no colour gels)
- Actors as props and/or set pieces
- Monotone use of voice
- Happy scenes performed sadly and vice-versa
- Limited physical involvement between characters
- Actors swapping roles in performance
- Actors speaking stage directions aloud
- Self-contained episodes (not scenes)
- Characters with backs to the audience
- Characters speaking directly to the audience in performance
- Stylised use of voice
Other Brechtian techniques and practices include:

- Exploring the “gest” of character. Gest meaning both gesture and gist (the core of the character). Actors are encouraged to explore “characteristic gestures” which sum up a character or a situation or an emotion (eschewing clichés of behaviour to induce empathy or illusion)

- Acting exercises to induce the “alienation effect.”

- Signs, placards or projections which tell us what’s going to happen before each scene, explanatory captions or illustrations, directions, summaries of off-stage or on stage action, all to disrupt the illusion, give us a context or message on which to base our observations.

- Masks and puppetry

- Visible stage machinery (expose the technology of theatre). Stage designs in Epic theatre are often non-realistic, suggesting more than just a particular location but also, by exposing the lights, ropes and orchestra keep the spectators aware of being in a theatre.

- Use of music to interrupt and comment on action. Comic songs and music are often used to provide emotional details to prevent melodrama or emotion from overtaking the audience. The purpose of song in his plays is not to heighten the emotion of the scenes but as a means to commentate or narrate what is going on. It is also a form of alienating the audience, for example, in Mother Courage and Her Children, the songs’ content may be serious and forewarning of hardships, while the music is happy and light. It shows a lighter side to a deeply serious situation and the dichotomy and ambiguity of it ultimately alienates the audience and makes them question the social realities that are being presented. The effect of this practice can be extremely jarring on an audience unused to Theatre of Alienation. Frequently, it leads to cheerful, upbeat tunes with disturbing lyrics. One of the most famous epic theatre songs is Kurt Weill’s “Mac the Knife,” which features jazzy, upbeat music combined with the tale of a deranged killer.

- Acting in the third person

- Having actors describe their moves and gestures outside the written dialogue

- Actors stepping out of character to lecture, summarize, or sing songs (that relate to or clarify the situation they are in or that relate to a theme or issue)

- Narration

- Breaking the fourth wall - ‘Breaking the fourth wall’ involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience, whether they break character or perform with an awareness of being watched.

- Props are frequently important features that also portray themes or ideas and help indicate a character’s status or profession. They are often symbolic.

- Episodic structure of the play

- The audience's degree of identification with characters and events is presumably thus controlled, and it can more clearly perceive the “real” world reflected in the drama.
A quotation from Brecht on Theatre (trans. John Willett, Methuen 1964)

**GEST**
(from chapter "On Gestic Music" (mid-1930s))

“'Gest' is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes... Not all gests are social gests. The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gest, though the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one, for instance if it comes to represent a badly dressed man’s continual battle against watchdogs...

A good way of judging a piece of music with a text is to try out the different attitudes or gests with which the performer ought to deliver the individual sections.” (pp. 104-105)

**GESTUS:**

Gestus is a theatrical technique that helps define the emotion within a character and the context they are in. It is the combination of a gesture and a social meaning into one movement, stance or vocal display. It can be alienating and jar the audience, as it is an unusual and non realistic way of forcing them to see the ‘bigger picture' of a situation. It is sometimes referred to as the 'social gest', as it is an action that allows the audience to understand something specific about the social circumstances presented on stage. For example, if a man was eating a sandwich and a dog suddenly attacked him and tried to take his food while the man tried to push the dog away, this would not be gestus. The act of pushing the dog away becomes gestus when social meaning is added to the picture. For example, the man is a servant in a castle and the dog belongs to the guards at the gate and they have let the dog out knowing that he will attack the man, and they are standing off to the side laughing at him. Now the action of pushing the dog away has become gestus as it is an action that holds social meaning. The audience knows that this is not just any man, this is a working class man who is being picked on by people with a little more power over him.

The most famous example of gestus is in Mother Courage and Her Children. Mother Courage shows her inner emotional turmoil not through words, but through a physical presentation. She looks at the audience and delivers a silent scream. Again, it is not the action alone that makes it gestus, but rather the combination of this action and the social meaning. Mother Courage has just lost a son, but if she makes any sound of recognition towards him she will put her life and the life of her daughter in danger. Now she represents any person who has had to keep quiet in order to save somebody else. She has been forced into a terrible situation and the audience gets to see this through her gestus of a silent scream.
Brechtian Techniques (theatrical conventions)

The theatrical conventions developed by Brecht are surrounded by much confusion. Although he wrote extensively on the dramatic theory behind his work, some aspects are still vague. To understand it, we must evaluate his theatrical conventions and how they relate to both his writings and productions, whilst keeping in mind that Brecht’s techniques were a by-product of his environment. His theatre is best described as a dramatic vessel of rational didacticism, influenced by his Marxist beliefs.

In order to incorporate Marxist theory in his works, Brecht devised various dramatic techniques to convey his message. Techniques such as the verfremdungsteffekt/alienation effect, didacticism, breaking the fourth wall, gestus, narration and use of song all encompass the Brechtian theorisation of Epic Theatre - a convention first founded by Irwin Piscator.

Didacticism

Didacticism is the instruction or teaching of a moral lesson. Brecht’s plays are didactic in that they all serve to teach the audience or send a message about certain aspects of society, politics or economy. They are plays which are designed to educate the performers and audience. It stems from Brecht's Marxist beliefs and the plays generally show the bourgeois society negatively and the rightness of Marxist morality. In Mother Courage and Her Children, specifically, the didacticism lies in the contradictions of the characters and how their choices have affected their lives and the value of it. The idea that Mother Courage is driven by making money and not taking care of her children is shocking to the audience. Whenever her children need her she is making a business deal. Her actions make the audience question: how much is life really worth? How much am I like Mother Courage? What would I change or do differently? The play teaches a lesson about society, economy and politics and wrestles with these throughout the play.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

‘The Fourth Wall’ is an imaginary wall separating the audience from the action on the stage. In realistic productions this wall remains intact and the performers do not acknowledge that they are being watched. The audience are observers who are conditioned to believe that the world of the play is ‘real’. It is a suspension of disbelief. Like most theories of realism, Brecht wanted to disrupt the notion of the fourth wall. ‘Breaking the fourth wall’ involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience, whether they break character or perform with an awareness of being watched. It is made clear that the characters and their actions are not real and the audience are aware that they are witnessing fiction. The theory behind this technique links back to his definition of Epic Theatre. By taking away the fourth wall the audience must face the action, make decisions and have the opportunity to be aroused to action.