Brecht’s theory of performance is in direct opposition to Stanislavsky’s System through which the actor is “looking to achieve ‘truth’ in performance” (Babbage 2004, 144). Stanislavsky’s method of training, associated predominantly with realism, demands that the actor use personal experience and memory to transform completely into character. The Brechtian actor works from the outside in, first determining the social and economic conditions that impact upon the character. In Epic Theatre, the narrative action is determined by social forces, as opposed to the free will of individual characters (Babbage 2004, 58).

In Children of the Black Skirt
Three actors play the roles of the lost children and, through the portal of clothing, which they discover in the abandoned building, they are transported into the timeless orphanage world, transformed into the lost characters who haunt the restless place. One lost child, traditionally cast with a female actor (though this role could be played by a male), is transformed through a nineteenth-century black skirt into the formidable grieving and silent governess (Betzien 2005, 1). The transformation from lost child to Governess is achieved via a simple zipping-up of the dress, at which point the actor physically evokes the still austerity of the Governess.

In another scene (Betzien 2005, 21) The Black Skirt is transformed into the grotesque Government Inspector of Orphanages via a grooming ritual enacted by the two orphan characters in which they undress and dress the actor before the spectator’s eyes. This ritual is underscored by a monotonous recitation of letters written to home. These letters reveal the silenced voices of these institutionalised children. Once Harrold Horrocks has “appeared”, he reads a series of hyperbolic, sanitised and censored letters by the children, reaffirming the value of these institutions and his role as Government Inspector, asserting the ‘rightness’ of an establishment that is blind to injustice and oppression.

The Black Skirt, wearing a skirt of Rosary beads attached to an enormous pair of scissors, is symbolic of Christian religious institutions, in particular Catholicism. The scissors replace the image of the crucifix and are symbolic of the severing of racial, class and familial identity, which was conducted with clinical brutality in state and religious institutions since colonisation. (Bean and Melville, 1990). Harrold Horrocks, our grotesque State Inspector, symbolises the corruption and ignorance of government. These characters are alienations of familiar institutions, familiar identities made strange through their heightened and grotesque physicality. The act of transformation, the metamorphosis of the actor from Black Skirt (church) to Harrold Horrocks (state) is a political one, suggesting the symbiosis of state and church, their complicity in the process of institutionalising and assimilating the black, poor and female in this country. This transformation while necessary logistically to conjure the presence of this character, has further value in exposing and critiquing the dominant ideology of Australian history and particularly institutional care.
In Children of the Black Skirt the enrolment of the powerless as the oppressor has an
arresting and alienating effect. It demands that the actor and director heighten the
physicality and consider carefully the Gestus of the characterisations. Kiebuzinska
defines the Gestus as, “a kind of pre-language, giving a direct presentation of social
relationships; at the same time it serves as an alienating mask rather than as a
medium of true expression” (in Mews 1997, 56). Brecht’s social Gestus is one that
exposes the social conditioning of the character and the situation through the body of
the actor.

In the haunted orphanage, time and space have converged. The multiple protagonists
of the narrative hail from various eras of Australia’s colonial past. The Black Skirt, the
governess of the orphanage, is an aristocratic Victorian figure from the late nineteenth
century. Harrold Horrocks, Inspector of Orphanages, is a pre World War Two
caricature. Our heroines, New One and Old One, are also separated by decades. Old
One is an Indigenous girl taken from the islands off the coast of Tasmania in the early
1800s and New One has endured the Great Depression in the slums of Sydney. The
various spirit stories, told in episodes that intertwine with the overarching narrative, are
but a glimpse of the countless injustices endured by the black, poor and female in this
country. The intention behind this convergence of time and space is to expose the
repetition of injustice. In each episode (containing its own protagonist/antagonist and
internal climactic structure) it becomes painfully evident to the spectator that cycles of
institutional abuse have been repeated decade after decade.

In the conclusion to the overarching narrative of Children of the Black Skirt, New One
and Old One overcome the Black Skirt by discovering her source of pain, her own
history of oppression, and by telling it; they release her from her purgatory. In this
action, the narrative affirms the power of solidarity against tyranny, the power of
storytelling as a weapon against oppression and the denial of history.
There still remains, however, a striking disequilibrium. Although the lost girls, once
released from the entrapment of their clothing, burn these items in the incinerator and
wander off into the dark bush in search of home, there remains a disquieting sense
that there are still countless more stories to tell, that the project of telling is never
ending.

The elements of music, design, multimedia and choreography are all essential
components in the creation of meaning and form the metatext of a production.
According to Brecht, a contradiction between these elements could achieve an
alienating effect, illuminating a moment in a strange and surprising way thus enabling
the audience to see the moment afresh. Theatre is essentially, “an aggregate of
independent arts in provocative tension” (in Weber and Heinmen 1984, 33).

The arrival of Harrold Horrocks, Inspector of Orphanages, is scored with a golden
book-style track that sharply contrasts the action of New One and Old One, slaving to
clean the orphanage in preparation for Horrock’s arrival. This is perhaps the most
“entertaining” sequence of the entire play: audiences greatly enjoy the grotesque
buffoonery of Harrold as he consumes an entire morning tea and burps loudly at the conclusion of it. The music signals to the audience that they can take pleasure in laughing at Horrock’s bumbling stupidity. In doing so, they share solidarity with the orphans, who are likewise amused. However, when the sequence ends in a humiliating inspection of the orphans, the mood changes dramatically.

Horrocks: S78. Step forward.
Old One takes one step forward
Horrocks: This child is dirty. Why are you so dirty?
Old One: I’m not dirty.
Horrocks: What?
Old One: That’s my colour, Sir
Horrocks: What?
Old One: That’s my colour, Sir.
Horrocks: What?
Old One: I’m Aboriginal, Sir.
Horrocks: Nonsense. You do not wash yourself properly. Nonsense. She is to scrub herself hard with a scrubbing brush all over, Miss Greenant. We’ll just see if we can’t get that colour off you. (Betzien 2005, 27).

There is no mistaking the humiliation of this moment, both for the Indigenous actor playing the role and for the audience. The audience has participated in the pleasure of the earlier moment, mistaking Horrocks for a harmless clown, when in fact his ignorance is more sinister; it represents a systemic, State-endorsed assimilation of culture. The audience at this moment realise that the elements of the production and, in particular, the music, conspired to lead them in a certain direction and then shattered that with a shocking and surprising new awareness. Many times during this sequence, young people have been prompted to voice the words “He’s a racist”: an impulsive need to articulate the particular oppression that is being represented in this moment.

Similarly, the use of samples from old colonial folk songs, which are often distorted and played in reverse, are used to challenge cultural nostalgia for the colonial past, a nostalgia akin to cultural amnesia, which has erased many of the realities of the frontier. Children of the Black Skirt’s multiple stories tell a different history, one of poverty, genocide, slavery and abuse.

Brecht, in collaboration with his principal scenographer, Neher, revolutionised stage design. Together they “enfranchised scenography, empowering it with potential for comment, criticism, humour and disruption” (Baugh in Thomson and Sacks 2006, 266). Formally, the sole function of design was the establishment of setting. Brecht’s Epic Theatre contrasted stark, impressionistic and functional backdrops with highly realistic properties. Brecht believed the use of old objects could “recount by their appearance the conditions of their use and imply a ‘sociology’ of prop making” (Baugh in Thomson and Sacks 2006, 268).
Children of the Black Skirt and Brecht

This approach to design creates an alienation effect. A tension develops between prop and backdrop that makes the real appear unfamiliar and strange. The design for Children of the Black Skirt conceptualised by Tanja Bear, deliberately manipulated this stylistic contradiction.

Key prop elements such as keys, a scrubbing brush, a fairytale book and a suitcase were all realistic prop elements, in fact, several of these items were sourced by the creative team during a field trip to an abandoned orphanage in Central Queensland. These properties were all weighted with a ‘sociology’ that became a powerful element in the production. These realistic items were then juxtaposed with an abstract landscape created out of sheets, a calico backdrop with a small window, and two wooden boxes. The orphanage beds were also dwarfed and abstract in design. The Governess, in her formidable nineteenth-century dress was an alienation of a Catholic nun. The very large scissors she wears, attached to a skirt of rosary beads, enabled audiences to view this austere religious icon in a new and surprising way. Audiences suddenly read the oversized scissors, an alienation of the crucifix, as a threatening symbol of authority and control.

“When my grandmother saw the play in Rockhampton her first comment was that the Black Skirt reminded her of a particular nun who had terrified her when she was a girl. A strict Catholic, she went on to reflect on the cruelty of the nun and the schooling system. Ironically, this particular nun spent considerable time at Neerkol Orphanage in Central Queensland, one of the most notoriously abusive institutions in this country’s history. This was my grandmother’s first experience of theatre. Her reading of this alienated image could be interpreted as evidence of the effectiveness of this technique in enabling the spectator to view the world in a new way.”

Alienation is a technique through which an alternative view of the world can be glimpsed. Through the estrangement of an image, young audiences are invited to see the image afresh, to actively critique and negotiate its meanings. Epic Theatre, in direct opposition to dramatic theatre, presents the world as it is becoming. It shows humankind as changeable and capable of making change. It is a theatre of possibility and hope, of activism and revolution.

There is little doubt that Brecht’s theories have revolutionised the theatre. These theories are as relevant today, in a post September 11 world, as they were in Brecht’s era. What is clearly emerging in contemporary practice is the hybridising of these techniques in response to a highly media-tised and technologically- orientated environment.