

BERTOLT BRECHT: an overview
Epic Theatre:

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. It is the same loose linking-together of events as we find in the Shakespearean history or the picaresque novel. Building on the work of Piscator, Brecht appropriated the term to serve his own ends. He later suggested that “dialectical” theatre might better describe his work than epic, in which thesis and anti-thesis are resolved into a new thesis.

Brecht rejected Wagner’s influential concept of a unified production or “total theatre” since it sought 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 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 advocated what he called **"non-Aristotelian"** theatre, which replaces Aristotle's foregrounding of pity with a readiness to help and his fear with a curiosity to know causality. This leads to a rejection of catharsis, empathy and imitation in Aristotle's terms, in favor of "alienation effect."

DRAMATIC THEATRE vs. EPIC THEATRE

Plotted	Narrated
Implicates the spectator in a stage situation and thus consumes ("verbraucht") his capacity for action	Turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action;
Suggestion	Argument
The spectator is in the middle of things, shares the experience	The spectator stands opposite, studies
Unalterable human being	He is alterable and being altered
Evolutionary determinism	Jumps, fissures, breaks
Man as fixed point (eyes on the finish)	Man as process (eyes on the course)
Thinking determines being	Social being determines thinking.
One scene makes another	Each scene for itself
Growth	Montage

Brecht viewed theatre as part of an enlightenment project, not mere entertainment ("culinary theatre") but theatre which forces judgment and leads to social action. However, do not be fooled by all the theoretical commentary. Brecht was keenly aware of the role “entertainment” plays in the theatrical event.

Established the Berliner Ensemble in 1949 in East Berlin. Employed long rehearsal periods, including observers to test out ideas, workshops, construction of a Modelbuch, "model book" or folio of designs to shape and aid further productions.

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.
- 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-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)
- Instead, Brecht's goal (supported by much theoretical writing) is for the spectator 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."
- Among other practices, Brecht developed the *Verfremdungseffekt* or "Alienation-effect". (don't take anything for granted, look beyond the obvious). Russian Formalists used the term *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 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 (expose the technology of theatre)
- To lessen this pedagogical rigour, Brecht devised the term "parable play" (German *Lehrstück*, literally "teaching play")
- Use of music to interrupt and comment on action
- Acting exercises to induce the "alienation effect."
- Acting in the 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)

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 [*conflits*] 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.

A few quotations 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 gestic are social gestic. The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gestic, 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 gestic with which the performer ought to deliver the individual sections." (pp. 104-105);

MUSIC:

from chapter "On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre" (c. 1935):

"Gestic music is that music which allows the actor to exhibit certain basic gestic on the stage. So-called 'cheap' music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta, has for some time been a sort of gestic music.... in my view Weill's music [for *Mahagonny*] is not purely gestic; but many parts of it are, enough anyway for it to represent a serious threat to the common type of opera, which in its current manifestations we can call the purely culinary opera. The theme of the opera *Mahagonny* is the cooking process itself." (p. 87);

REALISM, REALITY; WHAT REALISM MEANS:

from "The Popular and the Realistic" (c.1938):

"Our conception of *realism* needs to be broad and political, free from aesthetic restrictions and independent of convention. *Realist* means: laying bare society's causal network / showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators / writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society / emphasizing the dynamics of development / concrete and so as to encourage abstraction." (p. 109)

ACTING:

In relation to **Stanislavski** (the great Russian pioneer of realism and actor training)

- to get into the character ("build" it) as a **social being**, that is, to let these forces speak through it, rather than to get at the psychosocial roots of the character as "individual";
- actor's job is to give a reading (*darstellen*) of a character rather than become it (*vorstellen*);
- "third person" view by actor of the role;