

DRAMA *Works*

Brecht Through Practice

EXTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

It has become fashionable recently to run Brecht down and to state that with the retreat of Communism there is no further place for his methods in Western Theatre. At the same time, these same critics are happy to acknowledge theatre's debt to Brecht while consigning him to the historical past, a phenomenon that is interesting but finished.

It is certainly true that Brecht formulated many of his theories out of his own struggles to understand Communism and his perceived need to impose discipline on his own nature and artistic expression. The background from which Brecht's style emerged is important to understanding why Brecht comes up with the theories he does, but at the end of the day it is what his theatre proposes as an acting style that is our concern. Whatever the means by which he arrived at his theories, there is a recognisable style when these theories are put together into one body, called 'epic theatre', and this style is as valid and useful today as it ever was.

The epic style can be adapted to any form of theatre that puts a social or political message before the exploration of character. Once character is less important than message and the intricacies of human motive less intriguing than storytelling and the exploration of situation, you have Brechtian theatre.

The starting point of all great practitioners is the work of others and the state of theatre around them. Thus Stanislavski began from the prevalent melodrama and early attempts at realism performed by others, the failure of which made him see the need for a new type of actor, sincere, deserving of respect and totally dedicated to the exploration of truthful characterisation and human psychological motive. Brecht inherited a theatre world in which Stanislavskian naturalism was the accepted norm but which seemed to him woefully inadequate to express the social problems he saw all around him. More interesting by far to him were the experiments of such as Piscator, with whom he worked for a short time. Add to this a country in political ferment and you have all the ingredients to make Brecht the practitioner he was.

I will place the historical contexts and other influences more firmly as we go through the second section, in which I explore Brecht's theories through some of his plays. In the first section, we will explore Brecht's theories in their final state, always recognising that, unlike Stanislavski, Brecht does not have a clear System to follow which takes an actor on a path from A to B.

A few reminders for students to bear in mind before starting practical work on Brecht, along with the usual caveat - that when writing essays about Brecht, it is as valueless to trot out a list of practical work undertaken without explaining the theories, as it is to trot out theory without any reference to practice. Both are necessary.

1. First and foremost, to use Brecht as a theatre style is to work with political theatre in its broadest form.

2. A lot of Brecht's work is a tribute to the power of Stanislavski: he acknowledges how tempting it is for an actor to want to 'get into the skin of the part,' but it is precisely this seductive power that drives him to bombast against naturalistic theatre in which the audience "hang up their brains with their hats in the cloakroom," are sucked into "believing a lie" and, through sympathy with the characters, are uncritically caught up in the twists and turns of the events.

3. Despite this, Brecht is not an opposite to Stanislavski, as I find many students want to make him. He does not, for instance, want all characters to be stereotypes or unrealistic. In fact, for Brechtian theatre to work it is important that

the central characters are recognisable and life-like. The audience needs to know and understand them and so they must be rooted in reality. It is really only the 'baddies', the extreme characters through whom Brecht is making a political or social point, that ought to be stereotypes. Thus Grusha in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a 'real' honest hard-working servant girl but the Governor's Wife is a stereo-typed 'baddie', haughty, useless, selfish, strident. The acting styles can co-exist in the same piece of theatre because both characters are making statements to the audience, the one about the working class as perceived by Brecht, the other about the aristocracy.

4. All Brecht's theories make perfect sense if you remember the two essentials:

- a] The message must be clear, and
- b] The audience must remain critically aware.

I find all the techniques and theories hang on to one or other of these.

5. The main difficulty that students have is in separating Brecht's theories on acting and staging from his plays. Of course, his plays allowed him to explore his theories or, perhaps more likely, the plays dictated the need for a set of theories to accompany them. Can his theories be separated from his plays? Do the theories work on other material? The answer is 'yes' and it is because of this that Brecht is more than a product of his time, doomed to fade along with the Communist ideal. The fact that the theories stand apart from Communism and can work with any political or social message is Brecht's strength as a practitioner for today. Many parts of the first section of this handbook have practical suggestions in this area.

6. Like Stanislavski, Brecht's theories grew and changed out of practice. As Brecht's ideas cohered so his theories developed.

7. It is clear that the theories Brecht proposes are not a complete actor's training. Such theories as he has should run alongside common good practice for actors such as good vocal technique. Brecht's suggestions to actors on technique are not so different from those that Stanislavski propounds. Where they differ is in those theories where Stanislavski seeks to expose the workings of the inner soul of a person, which Brecht ignores completely. Instead, he concentrates on how to recognise outward signs such as a person might observe in the social structures around them. To clarify, Brecht might show you: 'Look, see how a man behaves when he is about to cheat another, his eyes ..., his mouth ... his voice ...etc.' whilst Stanislavski would be more interested in understanding the man's motives - why does he behave like that? The focus of attention, the purpose, is different. Stanislavski wants to know why it is so on a personal level - did the man have a difficult childhood, etc.? Brecht wants to know why he did it on a social level - why does a man do such a thing? What are the social ills that force him to cheat on his fellow? If such social conditions are prevalent in society, can we do anything about changing that society?

THE FIRST LESSONS

Ideally, you should have started from a course in naturalism or Stanislavski but I recognise that for many teachers this is not practicable. If that is the case and you are plunging straight into Brecht, I think it is still necessary to give a short idea of Stanislavski. This is because so much of what Brecht does is in instinctive reaction to naturalism or in conscious rebellion against it. To understand where Brecht is coming from it is necessary to see why he fought so hard against naturalism, which he saw as deceitful because it wooed the audience into believing a lie. Worse still, the System tried to convince actors that they too were living a lie. Nothing irritated Brecht more than the idea that a whole system of acting was evolved which worked hard to carry sensible intelligent people, both actors and audience, out of their rational senses into a world of make-believe where reason and common-sense were put on hold.

Nonetheless, he realised the power of Stanislavski to enchant both actors and audience. He realised the temptation for an actor to wish to 'become' the character and to live the part as truthfully and realistically as possible. But if an actor 'becomes' a character and convinces an audience of sane intelligent people that for a few hours they have witnessed him suffering and living out his life in front of them, what does that achieve? You may answer 'escapism' or 'further understanding of the nature of Man through empathy', but escapism is never enough for Brecht nor does he believe in the universal similarity of Man, so what good is empathy since it is furthering a basic error?

Brecht wants a theatre that achieves something, that challenges and makes an audience think. An audience that is sucked into the lives of characters on stage is uncritical. It doesn't ask why does something happen; it merely accepts, maybe sheds a few tears, says 'that's life, that's how it is,' with a sigh and then goes about its daily business and forgets ultimately all about it. Nothing has changed about the audience's life by witnessing a naturalistic play and Brecht wants change. Why? Because he's surrounded by a sick society - Europe in the '20s and '30s with the Depression and the frightening growth of Fascism - and is searching for tools to enlighten people and to do something about it.

To help students realise the difference between accepting, on the one hand, and questioning, on the other, the plot of a play and the characters' lives and motivations, try the following exercises:

Practical Work

- 1. Solo students volunteer to act out a typical moment of their day, e.g. their morning routine or going to bed. They are to do it as they would, i.e. visualising the geography of their rooms, not talking [one doesn't usually talk to oneself], reproducing what they do and relying on their own belief in what they are doing - this is why doing something familiar is important - to convince the audience of the reality of the performance.**

Having seen a number of these, ask a few to repeat them, this time describing and commenting on everything they are doing as if the audience is a friend with whom they are sharing their thought

processes. The tone in which this is done is entirely up to the student. It may be that some will 'put their actions under a microscope' - "Notice how I feel it necessary to brush each tooth separately...", or they may seek to make it amusing, objectifying themselves further, "Look how this geek spends ages arranging his hair parting. Does he think he'll attract the girls better this way? ..." Whatever way they choose to do it, it is the running commentary that is necessary. It will serve to objectify the performance and to concentrate on the outer actions and expression of the character rather than wondering, as in the first showing, what is going on inside the actor's head.

The conclusions to be pointed out are: if an audience is left to wonder and to work out what is going on it focuses the whole attention on the character and what is going on inside him. We are drawn into the inner life of the character. If the actor is dissociating himself from what he is doing by pointing things out to us, he is inviting objectivity. The link of being 'drawn in' is broken.

2. Here, in simplified form, is the beginning part of the plot of 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' by Brecht.

A servant girl in a grand court finds an abandoned baby during a violent uprising. Listening to the rebels' talk she realises the baby is the young son of the previous ruler, who has just been murdered. The rebel ruler has now just seized power, so the baby is clearly a threat to him and consequently in danger of his life. Despite the obvious danger, the servant girl takes the infant to save him from the immediate peril he is in. Their travels mean that the girl is always only just ahead of the enemy soldiers. She has to pretend the baby is her own son and when even that is not enough to divert suspicion from them she marries a farmer so as to pass the boy off as his son.

i] Act out the moment when the servant girl finds the baby, overhears the rebels and realises the baby is in danger. Make sure that your audience is caught up in the action, is afraid of what may happen and sympathises with the girl's dilemma.

ii] Act out the moment when, at the end of her tether, the girl realises she must marry a gross uncouth farmer whom she does not love in order to protect the child from suspicion. More sympathy will be gained for the girl if the audience comes to know that she was engaged to someone else before all this happened.

iii] Now repeat the first scene, with the following differences:

A narrator announces the scene and tells the audience what will happen.

The serving girl tells the audience all the pros and cons of taking the child.

Identify the moment when the girl makes her decision to take the child despite the dangers and disadvantages. Find a way of making this moment obvious to the audience.

iv] Repeat the second scene in a similar way, i.e. using a narrator, sharing the pros and cons, making the moment of decision clear.

Notice that the audience, though silent, have a more intellectually active part to play in this process. Experiment with taking this a little further, perhaps by characters inviting discussion from the audience along the lines of 'Can you think of any reasons why I should not take the child?' etc.

Make sure that the differences between the two variations of the scenes are fully discussed. They should at least notice the more active part from the audience and the fact that narration and direct address help the audience to see the actors just as actors. They are not 'being' the characters but are taking the first steps towards 'demonstration.' Better students may already be able to see that the narrator telling the audience what will happen takes away suspense and encourages the audience to look at the reasons why something happens. Dramatising the inner debate and identifying the moment of decision reminds the audience that we are all thinking beings with choices to do this thing or that thing throughout life. Making choices identifies us as human and reminds us of the power we have to change things; we are not governed by fate as naturalistic drama seems to suggest.

I am aware that these are tantalising ideas at this stage of the course and invite considerably more exploration and discussion. Each of these ideas is explored in greater detail further on, but a preliminary discussion which sets the students on the right paths of thought and therefore towards an understanding of where Brecht is coming from does no harm at this stage.

3. The students need to be in pairs or threes. Choose one of the following scenarios for improvisation. Stress that they should simply perform as they would normally, without worrying about Brecht. The characters are naturalistic.

a] A teenager asks his parent/s if he can stay out all night at a party. It is near examtime and the parents refuse. The teenager becomes defiant and angry. The scene's resolution is up to the performers.

b] An old person makes a bit of trouble and causes embarrassment to the couple with whom he lives, one of whom is his son or daughter. The old parent's future becomes the subject of heated discussion.

c] Tempted by the goods on offer, a youngster shoplifts a number of them. He is suspected by the shopkeeper, but manages to pass the goods into the shopping bag of an innocent bystander.

After the performance of the scenes, each group will need to repeat their scene again, but this time as if they were telling a story. Each character describes what he is doing and why. It is better if they use the past tense and the third person for this exercise, but at this early stage of the course don't insist on it if they find it difficult. This technique becomes easier as they become more familiar with it through the rest of the course. For the moment it would be sufficient for the actors to be saying, [for example] 'I came into the room. I noticed Gran was a bit quiet so I asked her what was up.' Gran then picks up the story: 'I didn't know how to answer my daughter because...'

There is a lot in the above exercises. Don't worry if they don't grasp everything straightaway. They will at least have got the beginnings of some ideas about the different acting style involved and the different process, in consequence, through which the actor is putting himself. Whether they have studied Stanislavski in some detail or have simply been involved in ordinary improvisation work throughout their school careers, their tendency will have been to perform in a manner as close to their perceptions of life as possible. By the end of this section they will at the very least have grasped:

1. that Brecht is non-naturalistic
2. that he invites a very different relationship between actor and audience
3. that both actor and audience are part of an ongoing critical and objective process which is active even during performance