
Brecht's Theatre: A Collective Political Meeting

Raymond Williams in his seminal work 'Drama from Ibsen to Brecht' (1965) asserts that "Brecht's work is the most important and original in European Drama since Ibsen and Strindberg." Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a theatre practitioner, playwright and a poet. He was a dramatic Picasso. Writing during the tumultuous times of war, authoritarian regimes and fascist ideology, Brecht went on to write plays that will awaken his audience out of complacency and their delusion of security. Brecht aimed at the creation of a critical consciousness in his audience. He believed that "to think or write or produce a play also means to transform the society, to transform the state, subject ideologies to close scrutiny." In order to inculcate critical consciousness in his audience Brecht used the theatre as an apparatus of education and mass communication. Till now the playwrights had only interpreted the world but the point is to change it and Brecht took the responsibility to change the socio-economic conditions through his didactic theatre or the theatre of the scientific age as Brecht puts it in his "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1949). Brecht was one of those writers who believed that art has a social purpose. He firmly of the opinion that "for art to be unpolitical means only to ally itself with the ruling group."

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) in his ground breaking treatise called 'What is Literature' (1948) talked about the idea of committed writer and "Littérature engagée" or engaged literature. Sartre defines engaged literature as a literature which has a responsibility towards the society. Brecht is a Sartrean committed writer who knows that words are action. "He knows that to reveal is to change..." Brecht's best plays achieve a prodigious level of social critique, opening out new horizons for a politically committed drama.

Reflecting on the circumstances of his life and his conception of the role of the writer, in his Nobel acceptance speech Albert Camus (1913-1960) addresses the issues of responsibility, which also concern power, oppression and resistance. The general aim of the writer in the modern world, Camus (1957) explains, must be to make the silence imposed by oppression "resounded by means of his art", and "to unite the greatest possible number of people" across ideological divisions that "breed solitude." The artists and their art, is constantly challenging and pushing the envelope of how society perceives the universe and what we consider to be acceptable. The artist is forcing us to reconsider our historical values and beliefs. The true artist is the rebel. The activity of writing for Camus is not only a question of aesthetic creativity, but of a wider moral and political resistance to domination and ideological obfuscation because lies and servitude, propaganda, and terror have become commonplace instruments of contemporary geopolitics, human existence is continuously at risk of limitless manipulation and degradation.

Camus in his pioneering work 'The Rebel' (book length essay, published in 1951) suggests that the rebellion is what makes one free – "in order to exist, man must rebel." In this sense Brecht was also a rebel as he rebelled against the conventional theatre and in his rejection of Greek tragedy. By rejecting the conventional mode of dramaturgy, Brecht came up with his profound idea of epic theatre. Brecht was influenced by the German Agitprop (German propaganda theatre), cabaret, Marxist ideology, Asian theatre and Piscator's proletarian theatre. He was of the opinion that the cultivation of rebellious consciousness is his preferred mode of intervention.

Brecht's theatre is in contrast with the Aristotelian theatre or the theatre of illusion. He opined that the bourgeoisie theatre or the Aristotelian theatre is the branch of narcotics business which stultify and pacified its spectators through the use of emotion and incapacitate one's ability to achieve social change. In 'Drama from Ibsen to Brecht', Williams argues that by Aristotelian' theatre, Brecht means dramatic naturalism, the dominant naturalism of the period after Ibsen. What Brecht is attacking, Williams contends, is the central thesis of the "illusion of reality", in which an action is created that is so like life that the verisimilitude absorbs the whole attention of both dramatist and audience. Williams gives some examples of Brecht's opposition between naturalism/Aristotelian drama and epic theatre: "The drama he opposes involves the spectator in a stage-action and consumes his capacity to act; the drama he recommends makes the spectator an observer but awakens his capacity to act ... the drama he opposes presents experience, drawing the spectator inside this until he is experiencing the action with the characters; the drama he recommends presents a view of the world, in which the spectator confronts something and is made to study what he sees ... the drama he opposes takes man, in the run of its action, as known, given, inevitable; the drama he recommends shows man producing himself in the course of the action, and therefore subject to criticism and to change."

Walter Benjamin in his seminal treatise 'Understanding Brecht' avers that Brecht succeeded in altering the functional relations between stage and audience, text and producer, producer and actor. Essentially what Brecht created, after long experiment, was a dramatic form in which men were shown in the process of producing themselves and their situations. This is, at root, a dialectical form, drawing directly on the Marxist theory of history in which, within given limits man makes himself.

One of the main characteristics of epic theatre is *verfremdungseffekt* (literal translation is ' to make strange') or alienation effect. Brecht borrowed this concept from Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky's concept of 'Ostranenie'.

The alienation effect attempts to combat emotional manipulation in the theater, replacing it with an entertaining or surprising jolt. For instance, rather than investing in or "becoming" their characters, they might emotionally step away and demonstrate them with cool, witty, and skillful self-critique. The director could "break the fourth wall" and expose the technology of the theater to the audience in amusing ways. The direct address of characters to the audience, songs and the sudden use of third person point of view, are some of the ways through which the playwrights make the audience feel that this just the image of reality not the reality itself. Brecht also have some instructions for the actor who can alienate the audience. During this process Brecht went against Constantine Stanislavsky's theories of acting. Constantine Stanislavsky encouraged the actor to live the part and to become the character. For Brecht, Stanislavsky's theories are the product of bourgeoisie theatre. Brecht in his essay 'The Street Scene' summarises his acting theories. The actor's duty is to show rather than imitate. The actor is allowed to directly address the audience. " The actor is not Lear, he shows Lear." The epic designer of the stage must show the artificiality of the act in order to make audience realize that this not reality but a representation of it.

Brecht eliminates the Aristotelian catharsis, purging of emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero. What Brecht emphasizes was the Apollonian spirit in his audience and artists. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844- 1900) in his ' The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music' (1872) propounded two principles that govern our lives. One of them is Apollonian which came from the Greek god Apollo who represents rational thinking, order and appeals to logic,

prudence and purity. In contrast with Apollonian there is Dionysian aspect, which came from the Greek god Dionysus, represents passion, irrationality and appeals to emotions and instincts. For Brecht, in order to critically comment on what is being acted on the stage, spectator must inculcate the Apollonian spirit in himself or herself.

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