

Epic Theatre and Traditional Theatre A Study in Contrast

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This paper juxtaposes Epic theatre as against Traditional theatre and calls Epic theatre as theatre of reason, because it's imparts didactic instruction upon the audience. It does not let the audience enjoy the play passively and tries to bring value to the society.

This study draws the material from Brecht's analysis and he does not owe to the ancient Greeks any significant role in his actions. The Greek play is believed to have catharsis as its chief aim. Traditional theatre is supposed to have catharsis as its chief aim. Traditional theatre was withheld in the epic theatre by creating an emotional detachment, not by involvement.

On the lines of an epic, the Epic theatre is a narrative which could commence anywhere and end anywhere unlike even the Shakespearean tragedies where almost all the characters die at the end of the play which gives an emotional purgation to the audience. If the protagonist is dead, the audience can be content with the fact that the antagonist is also dead. A comedy contains a happy ending, but a play staged according to the tradition of an epic theater does not contain any resolution. All these elements are absent in Brecht who involves the audience in the actions of the play by breaking the fourth wall. The spectators are troubled and burdened with palpable tension which he or she will carry home food for thought.

Hegel in his book "*Philosophy of fine Arts*" defines epic as the genre which portrays the spiritual world in the form of external reality. One of the objectives of the epic theatre is for the audience to always be aware that they are watching a play. One of the most important techniques Brecht developed to perform epic theatre is the '*Verfremdungseffekt*' or "Alienation-effect. Russian formalists used the term Ostranenie (Making Strange) to get what Viktor Shklovsky calls the "*Literary Effect*" and Piscator in fact developed the first epic theatre model.

To be unambiguous, the essential point of epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. The spectator must come to grips with things at the same time while watching such a play. But it would be wrong to deny emotion to epic theater completely. Many people imagine that the term 'epic theatre' is self-contradictory. This is one of the salient features of this study that finds that ambiguity is the hallmark of Brecht.

According to Walter Benjamin one of the most imperative features of the Epic theatre is the fact it is a "didactic play". Brecht wanted to make the audience realize certain socio-political conditions that were being depicted through the plot of the plays.

Many critics feel that the Epic theatre is one of the many manifestations of the Avant Garde theatre akin to Surrealism, Dadaism, and Nihilism. Surrealism as we know pictures the subconscious. Dadaism believes in open-endedness. Avant-Garde has its origin in the leftist political thought. It created a furor against the institutionalization of art. The practitioners drew inspiration from pre-Colombian art, pre-romantic art like Negro art, the art created by cave people ancient African people. Marcel Duchamp prepared art like urinal, anyone but Avant grade only can consider this is art piece. The world is created by chance and there is no meaning and relations were the belief of such artists. Marxism appellations and understanding of art came close to the estimation of Art that Brecht himself had.

Thus, Avant Garde theatre does not believe in the statement that the art has any meaning at all but there are fundamental differences between Avant-Garde and epic theater. Epic theatre is more ambiguous as far as its conception of art as an institution is concerned. Epic theater had enormous faith in the power of art to change the society in a constructive way. Traditional artists believed in rationality but an avant-Garde artist does not believe in rationality. An example of a masterpiece of the Avant Garde theatre is *Waiting for Godot*. The Avant Garde theatre before world war and during the world war got momentum and continued even after that. Brecht was not a totally Avant Garde artist, he was in the middle for Brecht thought he wanted his plays not to be political propaganda nevertheless Brechtian theatre is not averse to the elements of revolutionary concepts of a Picasso to formulate his concept of Epic theatre that stretched into the domains of experimental theatre. For

instance, in his *Good woman* or rather *Good Person of Szechwan* we have these lines concerning love: “Wang: She (Shen Teh) has failed in her love because she obeyed the commandment to her neighbours!!” (Pro) This is the way Brecht makes fun of the commandments of others. Willett speaks of the complications of the conception of epic theatre in the following extract:

The dangers which the apparatus can present were shown by the New York production of *Die Mutter*. Its political standpoint puts the Theatre Union in quite a different class from the theatres which had performed the opera *Mahogany*. Yet the apparatus behaved exactly like a machine for simulating the effects of dope. Not only the play but the music too was distorted as a result, and the didactic aim was, broadly speaking, missed. Far more deliberately than in any other play of the epic theatre, the music in *Die Mutter* was designed to induce in the spectator the critical approach which has been outlined above. Eisler’s music can by no means be called simple. Qua music it is relatively complicated, and I cannot think of any that is more serious. (Willett, 88)

A prudent observation could be that Brecht simplifies the toughest political problems, whose solution is a life and death matter for the working class. The accusation that Communism leads to chaos is challenged by Brecht. The piece ‘In Praise of Learning’, discusses the problem of learning with that of the working class’s accession to power. According to Brecht:

[...] the final chorus ‘*In Praise of Dialectics*’, which might easily give the effect of a purely emotional song of triumph, has been kept in the realm of the rational by the music. (It is a frequently recurring mistake to suppose that this - epic - kind of production simply does without all emotional effects: actually, emotions are only clarified in it, steering clear of subconscious origins and carrying nobody away.) In this chapter we analyse Brecht’s Dramaturgy vis-à-vis Epic Theatre. (Willett, 88)

The epic theatre hence lampooned moralizing or sermonizing as beautifully avoided by Karnad and Tendulkar. In the epic theatre moral arguments only took second place since it wanted them less to be moralized and more to observe. That is to say if they observed, and then the thick end of the wedge followed: the story’s moral. Of course, we cannot say that we started our observations out of a pure passion for observing as Brecht put it without any more practical motive, only to be completely environment, circumstances that were barely tolerable. It reminds us of Tendulkar who had to work in red light areas to show the dirty realities beyond the moral compass. It is not only moral considerations that make hunger, cold and oppression hard to bear. Similarly, the object of our study is not just to arouse moral objections to such circumstances but to discover means for the elimination of existing problems. We are not in fact speaking in the name of morality but for the victims as Tendulkar would vouchsafe that the victims are often told that they ought to be contented with their lot, for moral reasons but then Benare tries to revolt for she thinks of her life in this world. Morality exists for humans and not vice versa. It would be an ordeal to gather to what extent and in what sense the epic theatre could be a moral institution. For Brecht in a way never wanted Epic theatre to be a moral institution.

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theatre. Its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity bring it close to the old Asiatic theatre. Didactic tendencies are to be found in the medieval mystery plays and the classical Spanish theatre, and also in the theatre of the Jesuits. (Willett, 75-76)

These theatrical forms corresponded to particular trends of their time and vanished with them and the modern epic theatre can’t free itself of certain trends. Therefore, it cannot by any means be practiced universally. Secondly, most audience today is not disposed to use the theatre for ventilating their problems. London, Paris, Tokyo and Rome maintain their theatres for quite different purposes. Third soft grounds for an epic and didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time. In Berlin, Fascism put a very definite stop to the development of such a theatre. Luckily in India Karnad today might have problems but in times of *Hayavadana*, he never had morality problems.

Another problem with Epic theatre is that it demands not only a certain technological level but a powerful, awakening in society which is interested to see vital questions freely aired for setting solution. Avant Garde also fails Brecht, Tendulkar, Karnad in finding solutions.

Hence the epic theatre on a larger canvas attempt to overcome these challenges on its own and when Brecht faced hurdles, he chose to perform in the USA instead of locking horns with fascism.

Brecht did not escape from danger. He suffered problems both in his personal life and in his theatrical life. The evolution of the 'Lehrstuecke' for which the nearest English equivalent is 'learning-play' was both a personal and a theatrical phenomenon for Brecht as is apparent from the study of his life and his dramaturgical experiments.

Coming back to the Aristotelian play, on the other hand its task was to exhibit world as it is and on the other hand it tried, the traditional play showed the world through its evolution and exhibited a common truism. The audience, once it is in the theatre becomes a mob, which must be and can be affected only through its emotions. It has the mental immaturity but highest strange emotional suggestibility of a mob. Looking at this type of theatre Brecht feels that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre. He treats them as individuals of mental and emotional maturity.

Ultimately if theatre is capable of going ahead of its public instead of running after it, then it is the theatre of the working class. But going ahead does not mean excluding the public from a share in what is produced. Tendulkar exemplarily displays this for he tried to organize the supervision of production by the most politically and culturally developed sections of Marathi plebian class. A whole series of questions that arose during Brecht's production of *Mother* could have been solved by collaboration with the workers that would have been simple to organize. Politically-educated workers, for instance, would never have accepted the theatre's view that the big anti-war propaganda scene in the third act must at all costs be cut, on the grounds that curtailing the play to two hours was all-important to the public. but that could have led to having a scene (XII) which shows how the Bolshevik programme was rejected by the great bulk of the proletariat in 1914, then having the 1917 Revolution (XIV) follow immediately on it like a windfall though it ought to be it must be shown that such changes are only brought about by revolutionary work where Tendulkar and Karnad like Brecht leave a mark in their plays.

The drama of the *Mother* and *Silence* type both demand and permit a far higher degree of freedom for other arts, namely music and stage design, than any other type of play. Brecht's last-minute Russianizing of the costumes evoked a picture-book atmosphere and gave exotic local colour to the revolutionary workers' activities. It was decided without his being asked. But unfortunately, it is only much later that Tendulkar could have such extravagant public awareness.

For example, Brecht had the lighting tricks of a theatre dedicated to illusion were applied in a theatre designed to break illusion. He created atmospheric October evening light intruding on simple walls and mechanisms which aimed at quite different effects. Brecht would afford the entire sister arts like the chorus 'Die Partei ist in Gefahr' upset the whole production. Instead of placing the singer (or Singers) near the musical apparatus or else offstage the director had the singers burst into the room when the mother lay ill, inviting herewith emphatic gestures to come to the Party's aid. The personal feeling for communication in its hour of danger was turned into an act and even the totally ill; the old woman gets hounded out of her bed. It must know how to listen to artistic and political arguments and should not give the director an opportunity to 'express' his individual self and here Brecht did not have much to say.

An important question is that of simplification of Marxist approach which Brecht felt necessary in order to show the attitude of the play's characters clearly enough for the spectator to grasp all its political implications. Nevertheless, doesn't simplification lead to primitivism? In the epic theatre, it is perfectly possible for a character to explain himself in a minimum amount of time, for instance by merely reporting, I am the teacher in this village; my work is very difficult, for I have too many pupils, and so forth. But what is possible has first to be made possible. An artist's efforts come to fore here as the gest and speech have to be carefully chosen to be performed on a large scale. As the spectators' interest is directed purely towards the characters' attitudes the relevant gest must in each case be, aesthetically speaking, significant and typical. Above all, the director needs a historian's eye. The little scene where Vlassova gets her first lesson in economics, for instance, is by no means just an incident in her own life; it is historic event; the great pressure of misery forcing the exploited to think. They are finding the causes of their problem. Plays of this type are so inherently concerned with the life portrayed, as an evolution, that they really only exert their full influence when seen a second time. There are sentences articulated by the characters which are only grasped fully when one already knows how these characters will speak as the play develops. For Brecht this means that incidents and sentences have to be given such a stamp that they sink into the memory.

In the Theatre Union's production of *Mother* a correct way of speaking was used for the following sentences:
by Mrs. Henry in the scene where the mother is lying ill (then unfortunately cuts were made here);
by John Boruff as Pavel in the May Day demonstration scene, especially the passage 'Smilgin,

worker, revolutionary, 15 years in the movement, on May First, 1908, at 11 o'clock in the morning, etc.'; by Millicent Green in the bible-tearing scene, when as the tenant under notice she asks for the Bible in order to prove that Christians are supposed to love their neighbours. These passages were properly spoken because they were spoken with the same sense of responsibility as a statement made for the record in a court of law and because the gest stays in the memory. (Willett, 83)

No doubt the epic theatre is mainly interested in the attitudes which people have for one another. The epic theatre is greatly practical and human behaviour is shown as evolving with man himself as dependent on certain political and economic factors and is thought to a great extent capable of altering them. To give an example: a scene where three men are hired by a fourth for a specific illegal purpose (Mann is Mann) has to be shown by the epic theatre in such a way that it becomes possible to imagine the attitude of the four men other than as it is expressed there: i.e. so that one imagines either a different set of political and economic conditions under which these men would be speaking differently, or else a different approach on their part to their actual conditions, which would likewise lead them to say different things. In brief the spectator is given the chance to chastise human behaviour from a social point of view, and the scene becomes a piece of history with the notion that the spectator ought to be in a position where he can know about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave. It technically implies that the actors' social gest becomes particularly important. The arts have to pay attention to the gest. (Naturally this means socially significant gest, not illustrative or expressive gest). The gestic principle takes over, as it were, from the principle of imitation.

Brecht therefore brings in a great departure from a great revolution in the art of drama though the drama of contemporary time still follows Aristotle's recipe for achieving what is known as catharsis (the spiritual cleansing of the spectator).

In Aristotelian drama the plot leads the hero into situations where he reveals his innermost being. All the incidents shown have the object of driving the hero into spiritual conflicts. It is a possibly blasphemous but quite useful comparison if one turns one's mind to the burlesque shows on Broadway, where the public, with yells of 'Take it off!', forces the girls to expose their bodies more and more. The individual whose innermost being is thus driven into the open then of course comes to stand for Man with a capital M. Everyone (including every spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a performance of Oedipus one has for all practical purposes an auditorium full of little Oedipuses, an auditorium full of Emperor Joneses for a performance of The Emperor Jones. Non-Aristotelian drama would at all costs avoid bundling together the events portrayed and presenting them as an inexorable fate, to which the human being is handed over helpless despite the beauty and significance of his reactions; on the contrary, it is precisely this fate that it would study closely, showing it up as of human contriving. (Willett, 87)

No doubt two generations of the serious European drama have passed; still, a period of experiment has not led to any definite and clearly established result. In Brecht's view these experiments were pursued along two lines which occasionally intersected but can none the less be followed separately. They are enunciated by the two functions of entertainment and instruction; that is to say that the theatre organized experiments to increase its ability to amuse, and others which were intended to raise its value as education.

Brecht exports various experiments designed to increase the theatre's capacity to entertain, and singles out Vakhtangov and the constructivist Meyerhold - who 'took over from the Asiatic theatre certain dance-like forms and created a whole choreography for the drama' - Reinhardt, with his open-air productions of Faust, Jedermann and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his seating of actors among the audience in Buchner's *Damon's Death*; Okhlopkov, and the elaboration of crowd scenes by Stanislavsky. But 'on the whole the theatre has not been brought up to modern technological standards', to beef up his ideas of experimental theatre.

Going ahead he sees the playwrights, such as Ibsen, Tolstoy, Strindberg, Gorki, Tchekoff, Hauptmann, Shaw, Georg Kaiser and Eugene O'Neill, and mentioning his own *Threepenny Opera* as 'a parable type plus ideology-busting', following which he finds Piscator's theatre was 'the most radical' of all such attempts. Brecht involved in these experiments, was very clear for every single one was aimed to increase the theatre's impact on society to educate.

Further Brecht felt that these discoveries have not yet been taken up by the international theatre, this electrification of the stage has been virtually forgotten; the whole ingenious machinery is rusting up, and grass is growing over it, and asked questions for the lacunae and the answers were not forthcoming.

The destruction of this eminently political theatre could be attributed to political causes and the increase in the theatre's value as political education clashed with the growth of political reaction, derailing its growth.

Brecht not to be disillusioned went to feel that the theatre of his day could find an increasingly marked conflict between the two elements which went to make it up. Therefore, he brooded on theatre's task of entertainment and instruction. That 'assimilation of art to science' which according to him afforded naturalism its social influence undoubtedly retarded artistic capacities, notably the imagination, the sense of play and the element of pure poetry and harmed its artistic aspects.

It is indeed essential to look at expressionism of the postwar period which showed the World as Will and Idea and led to a special kind of solipsism and the theatre's answer to the great crisis of society was that art revolts against life. Where the world existed purely as a vision, strangely distorted, a devil conjured up by restless souls. Nevertheless, expressionism vastly enriched the theatre's means of expression and brought aesthetic gains that still have to be fully exploited, but it proved quite incapable of shedding light on the world as an object of human activity. The theatre's educative value collapsed.

This is quite apart from the fact that such productions split the audience into at least two mutually hostile social groups, and thus put a stop to any common experience of art. The fact is a political one. Enjoyment of learning depends on the class situation. Artistic appreciation depends on one's political attitude, which can accordingly be stimulated and adopted. But even if we restrict ourselves to the section of the audience which agreed politically, we see the sharpening of the conflict between ability to entertain and educative value. Here is a new and quite specific kind of learning, and it can no longer be reconciled with a specific old kind of entertainment value. At one (later) stage of the experiments the result of any fresh increase in educative was an immediate decrease in ability to entertain. ("This isn't theatre, its secondary-school stuff'.) Conversely, emotional acting's effects on the nerves was a continual menace to the production's educative value. (It often helped the educational effect to have bad actors instead of good ones.) In other words, the greater the grip on the audience's nerves the less chance there was of its learning. The more we induced the audience to identify its own experiences and feelings with the production, the less it learned; and the more there was to learn, the less the artistic enjoyment. (Willett, 123-124)

Critically speaking, half a century's experiments, conducted in nearly every civilized country, had won the theatre brand-new fields of subject-matter and types of problem, and made it a factor of marked social importance. At the same time, they had brought the theatre to a point where any further development of the intellectual, social (political) play will destabilize the artistic experience. A technical apparatus and a style of acting emanated which could do more to stimulate illusions than to give experiences, more to inebriate than to educate, more to deceive than to illumine.

It would be relevant to observe that the good of a constructivist stage such as of the finest lighting equipment if it lit nothing but childish and twisted representations of the world; of a suggestive style of acting if it only served to tell us that A was B? What purpose could it be if the whole box of tricks if all it could do was to offer artificial surrogates for real experience? Why this infinite ventilating of problems that was always left unsolved? Is this titillation because of the nerves or because of the brain? Should it be ignored? Brecht felt that.

The development tended towards a fusion of the two functions, instruction and entertainment. If such preoccupations were to have any social meaning, then they must eventually enable the theatre to project a picture of the world by artistic means: models of men's life together such as could help the spectator to understand his social environment and both rationally and emotionally to master it'.

Brecht goes on, in terms that anticipate the Short Organum and perhaps reflect his work on the first version of Galileo, to lament man's failure to understand the laws governing his life in society. His knowledge of these has not kept pace with his scientific knowledge, so that 'nowadays nearly every new discovery is greeted with a shout of triumph which transforms itself into a shout of fear'. (Cp. the long speech in Scene 14 of Galileo.) But art ought to be able to give 'a workable picture of the world. (Willett, 123-124)

Brecht argues that, art gets its effects more by empathy than by accuracy and he condemns empathy on the same grounds as before, and describes the attempt to break it off by methods of 'alienation'. This technique was improvised at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin with 'the most talented of the younger generation of actors . . . Weigel, Peter Lorre, Oskar Homolka, (Carola) Neher and Busch', and also with amateur groups, workers' choruses, etc.

This all represented a continuation of previous experiments. Piscator in his experiments, allowed the machinery to be mastered and led to a beautiful simplicity of performance. The so-called epic style of production which thus developed at the Schiffbauerdamm Theater proved its artistic merits relatively soon, and the non-Aristotelian school of playwriting tackled the large-scale treatment of large-scale social objects. There was some chance of changing the choreographic and grouping aspects of Meyerhold's school from artifice into art, of trails forming the Stanislavsky school's naturalistic elements into realism. Speech was related to gestic; both common language and verse speaking when-shaped according to the so-called gestic principle. A total revolution took place in stage design. By a free manipulation of Piscator's principles it became possible to design a setting that was both instructive and beautiful. Symbolism and illusion could be more or less dispensed with. The playwright could work out his experiments in uninterrupted collaboration with actor and stage designer; he could influence and be influenced. At the same time the painter and the composer had regained their independence, and were able to express their view of the theme by their own artistic means. The integrated work of art (or 'Gesamtkunstwerk') appeared before the spectator as a bundle of separate-elements. Here the essential departure from Aristotle was complete.

No doubt since inception, the classical collection formed the basis of many of these experiments. The artistic means of alienation provided a greater support to the living works of dramatists of other periods, and it would not be redundant to say that dramas owe a lot to them and such valuable old plays could be performed by either jarring modernization or curator like methods, and in an entertaining and instructive way.

Simply put, it ingrained a particularly salutary effect on the contemporary amateur theatre when it is no longer forced to work by hypnosis. It seems possible that a line may be drawn between the playing of amateur actors and professionals without one of the theatre's basic functions having to be sacrificed.

Here it is pertinent to exemplify that, the Vakhtangov or Okhlopkov companies and the workers' groups reconciled on this new foundation. The variegated experiments of half a century seem to have acquired a basis that allowed them to be exploited.

Nonetheless these experiments are not so easy to describe. Brecht felt forced to state his belief that he could indeed encourage artistic understanding on the basis of alienation. This is not very surprising, as the theatre of past periods also, technically speaking, achieved results with alienation effects - for example the Chinese theatre, the Spanish classical theatre, the popular theatre of Brueghel's day and the Elizabethan theatre.

Here is the first indication that Brecht wanted to strike a balance

Between didacticism and entertainment. Ever since the *Lehrstücke* his theoretical writing had been consistently on the side of the former; thus compare this essay with 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction' (p. ff), where learning is supposed to contain its own amusement. Soon, however, he was writing in his diary (12 January 1941, quoted in Mittenzwei, Bertolt Brecht, East Berlin, 1962, P- 332):

Finally one could not but be obligated to the fact that non-Aristotelian theatre is only one form of theatre; it furthers specific social aims and has no claims to monopoly as far as the theatre in general is concerned.

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