

Brecht's Epic Theatre as a Modern Avant-Garde and Its Influence on Postmodern Theatre/Drama

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"It is safe to predict that Brecht's work will become increasingly important for us; not only because it is great, but because it is exemplary as well." (Roland Barthes)

Abstract: As one of the most influential figures in theatre, Bertolt Brecht has stamped his legacy in the world theatre. His search for a new kind of theatre made his theatre a modern avant-garde which has left its traces in postmodern theatres. This paper tries to investigate Brecht's epic theatre as a modern avant-garde and its influence in postmodern theatre. His epic theatre was in fact a revolt against the main stream modern theatre in which Brecht openly declares that theatre should be 'political.' Brecht's theatre was so influential that his theatre becomes reference to the postmodern theatre.

Key words: epic theatre, Bertolt Brecht, avant-garde, postmodern, propaganda

Bertolt Brecht was a modern man. He grew as a dramatist in a world where modern ideas were at war, trying to prove which one was the best. Liberalism was head to head with communism and capitalism was facing the new born socialism. The war was complicated by socialism's variants, one of which was the fierce social nationalism manifested in Hitler's Nazism. During this period, as an artist Brecht was fascinated by Marx's ideas, which put him in the socialist front. Roland Barthes even clearly calls him a Marxist (Worthen, 1993, p. 772).

Brecht, however, although a Marxist and clearly anti-capitalist, did not actually belong in either of the competing parties. In the rivalry of classes between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the socialist proletariat, he was in favor of the proletariat. Nevertheless, he was not actually “a member of the proletariat fighting for the interest of his social class, but rather a self-exiled member of the bourgeoisie” (Bremer, 1976, p. 1). In his journal written when he was in exile in Denmark he wrote, “I greatly like the proletariat belief in its final victory. But the proletariat closely connected belief in various other things it has been told, I find disturbing” (Brecht, 1993, p. 6). He had an antibourgeois attitude because of his deep disappointment in his society’s civilization after World War I. He agreed with Marx that it was the capitalist that created the ‘decadent’ society. However, after World War II, although he shared the same basic Marxist ideology with the communist party, he often had disagreements with them. Brecht, says Willet, “was not the kind of figure who fitted all that easy into any grouping” (Brecht, 1992, xi). As an artist, therefore, Brecht did not serve any political “party.” His aesthetics was anti-Aristotelian dramatic theatre, but it also “clashed with the (communist) aesthetics of social realism” (Hubner, 1992, p. 139). He went to a different cutting edge and developed his aesthetics with continuous experiments.

Brecht’s theatre--which is known as epic-theatre--, was clearly an avant-garde. In fact it has been considered as one of the most important and influential modern avant-garde theatres. His aesthetics has continued to influence theatre until the present day, when the school of thought has shifted from modernism to postmodernism. In this paper I shall examine how Brecht’s epic theatre influences postmodern theatres. To do so, first of all, I will review how Brecht’s epic theatre is considered a modern avant-garde. Then, I shall examine the ideas in his epic theatre that initiate the birth of postmodern theatres.

EPIC THEATRE AS A MODERN AVANT-GARDE

Brecht’s epic theatre developed in a political upheaval. Elin Diamond noted that his theory was written over 30-year periode (Worthen, 1993, p. 1284), ranging from pre- to post-World War II. To understand it we need to review its historical background before examining its theoretical foundation: the basic philosophy of epic theatre.

Roland Barthes (in Worthen, 1993, p. 772) wrote, “to separate Brechtian theatre from its theoretical foundation would be ... erroneous ...” Examining its basic philosophy brings us to the understanding of Epic theatre’s content. We will finally see how the content finally leads to the development of its form.

Theatre was highly related to politics during Germany’s political warfare. This close relationship is due to the fact that theatre is a very effective media to gain influence. Theatre, according to Hubner (1992), is distinguished from the other arts in that it is institutional and social in nature (p. 5). “These characteristics closely ally to politics, since they make it possible for theatre to be used as an instrument of propaganda” (pp. 5-6). The socialists were really aware of this idea. In fact, they “believed in the idea that theatre should serve society” (Gerould in Hubner, 1992). Consequently, considering that the popular “bourgeois” realism carried the ideas of capitalism, efforts were made by “the revolutionaries” to battle such theatres.

Before Hitler came to power in 1933, there were at least two dominant theatre ideologies in Germany that were against (western) bourgeois realism: the social realism and the emerging cult (Nazi’s) theatre. These two ideologies at first looked alike in that they worked for the revolution. They all had influential theatre figures who made “experiments” to develop a new kind of theatre. “The avant-garde artists were denounced as ‘breeders’ of the proletarian world revolution” (Zortman, 1984, p. 2). Brecht was supposedly one of them. However, since 1927 Hitler’s National Socialist Party began to develop their own kind of theatre, cult theatre, which was used to develop the idea of Germany’s ‘pure’ and ‘genuine’ culture (Zortman, 1984, p. 1). This party “intended not only to curb the tide of bourgeois cultural dominance but (also) to annihilate it” (p. 16).

This cult theatre reached its peak when Nazi ruled the country. “When Hitler came to power, the German theatre was flourishing, with numerous wonderful buildings and high artistic level assured by a nucleus of outstanding directors and actors” (Hubner, 1992, p. 90). This, however, did not benefit Brecht and his friends since they were just empty propaganda in which creativity had to submit itself to political purposes. About this situation Zortman (1984) comments as follows:

Fettered by their extreme ideology, the Nazi could never appreciate that all artistic creativity spring from individual human inspiration, ... They could never apprehend that though he may criticize or even ridicule his culture, he basically respects even reveres that culture, if it is worthy, and thrives on his association with it by the bestowal of his talents" (p. 7).

Aesthetically, Brecht suffered more since the Nazi "put a very definite stop to the development of such (epic and didactic) theatre" (Brecht in Worthen, 1993, p. 771). Brecht, being unable to work and having a Jewish wife, chose to avoid Hitler by living in other countries (starting from Denmark) where he continued to work on the epic theatre.

After World War II, in 1948, Brecht went back to Berlin (East Germany). However, although living in a country with Marxist ideology, he was not really welcome. Brecht's epic theatre had to face the socialist realism. "Brecht's staging was accused of symbolism and naturalism at one and the same time, or still worse of not fitting within the norms of uniform socialist-realist art with its simplified didacticism and idealization of reality" (Hubner, 1992, p. 139). This is because even though Brecht had relatively the same ideology with the socialist-realist, he had a different approach to Marxism.

Unlike the socialist-realist, although his theatre was also political in nature, Brecht's experiments with epic theatre were not primarily meant to gain power. With some other Germany's avant-garde artists, Brecht started from the fact that "(early) in the nineteenth century theatre was synonymous with the cheapest and artistically most dubious form of entertainment. This state of affairs spurred into action socially conscious individuals who decided that they must provide the masses with artistically worthwhile theatre" (Hubner, 1992, p. 106). Brecht did want to see his society change, but he was not involved in the proletariat's effort to rule the country.

To Hubner, Brecht's theatre differed from socialist-realist theatre in that Brecht's was agitation theatre, while the socialist-realist's was a propaganda theatre. "Propaganda embellishes reality; agitation wants to change it" (Hubner, 1992, p. 139). Hubner contends that Brecht's aesthetics got its root in 1920s under the distinct influence of Piscator and agitational theatre (p. 139). Szanto (1978), however, sees it differently.

He believes that all theatre is propagandistic (p. 72). “The play propagandizes an ideology without an awareness on the part of the playwright or of the production that the presentation is implicitly laden with values which the play is propagandizing” (Szanto, 1978, p. 73). To Szanto, even Aeschylus’s or Shakespeare’s plays contain propaganda!

Szanto categorizes theatre’s propaganda into three: agitation propaganda, integration propaganda, and dialectical propaganda (p. 72). Quoting Jaques Ellul he says, “(agitation propaganda) is most often subversive propaganda and has stamp of opposition. It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government or the established order” (p. 73). Socialist-realism falls into the first category. Integration propaganda is “a self-producing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of permanent social setting” (Ellul in Szanto, 1978, p. 74). “Bourgeois realism” belongs to this kind of propaganda.

Brecht’s theatre, of course, falls into Szanto’s third category. This category, in his opinion, “is the most difficult theatre to create” (p. 75). About this kind of theatre he further says:

It is a theatre which attempts to demystify, by depicting separately, interactively and always clearly, the basic elements which comprise a confused social or historical situation. This is the science of dialectic materialism, . . . , brought to dramatic presentation” (p. 75).

Using Szanto’s view point we can finally see what Brecht’s theatre is about. We can now trace epic theatre’s basic philosophy (content) and its form.

Using Guba & Lincoln’s frame (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 105-117), we can say that as a Marxian theatre Brecht’s epic theatre views reality as follows:

Ontology	Historical realism—virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic ... value; crystallized over time.
Epistemology	knowledge (of reality) is value mediated and hence value dependent.
Methodology	dialectical

'Self' in the epic theatre, therefore, is shaped by any dominant social/political/ cultural/economic structures. No self is either natural or independent. Unlike in classical plays—Greek plays especially--no suffering is natural: it is always related to “structures that constrain and exploit human kind” (Guba & Lincoln in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). 'Self' is value dependent, unlike in the realist's belief in which someone can choose his own identity. One needs, first of all, to liberate himself/herself from the oppressing structure.

Changing/liberating 'self' requires more than just psychological analysis. Brecht contends that there has to be “a transformation of psychological 'conflict' into historical condition” (Worthen, 1993, p. 773) in theatre to liberate 'self.' To really understand the historical condition and to realize that a person is formed by the dominant values/he has adopted unconsciously, a critical mind is needed. Therefore, neither the actor nor the spectator should be drawn into “simple empathy” (Brecht, 1992, p. 71), in which they usually try to identify themselves.

In his explanation about epic theatre, Brecht proposes that theatre should provide a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding (p. 71). Further, addressing the spectator Brecht gives a comparison between dramatic theatre's spectator and epic theatre's spectator as follows:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It's only natural—It'll never change—The suffering of this man appals me, because they are inescapable—That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it—that's not the way—That's extraordinary, hardly believable—It's got to stop—The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary—That's great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (p. 71).

To accommodate the contents, Brecht needed a new form. “Shakespeare's great plays, the basis of our drama, are no longer effective” (Brecht, 1992, p. 20). He said further that those works were followed by three centuries in which the individual developed into a

capitalist, and what killed them was not capitalism's consequences but capitalism itself (p. 20). A new form, therefore, was to be developed; and the birth of the epic theatre was inevitable. How is the form like? Brecht's table below gives a clear general explanation about the form of the epic theatre:

DRAMATIC THEATRE	EPIC THEATRE
plot	narrative
implicates the spectator in a stage situation	turns the spectator into an observer, but
wears down his capacity for action	arouses his capacity for action
provide his with sensation	forces him to take decisions
experience	picture of the world
the spectator is involved in something	he is made to face something
suggestion	argument
instinctive feelings are preserved	brought of the point of recognition
the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience	the spectator stands outside, studies
the human being is taken for granted	the human being is the object of the Inquiry
he is unalterable	he is alterable and able to alter
eyes on the finish	eyes on the course
one scene makes another	each scene for itself
growth	montage
linear development	in curves
evolutionary determination	jumps
man as a fixed point	man as a process
thought determines being	social being determines thought
feeling	reason

(p. 37).

We can readily see that the table answers ontological, epistemological and methodological questions about epic theatre. The contrast between “thought determines being” and “social being determines thought,” for instance, is directly related to the ontological and epistemological contrast between positivism and Marxist critical theory.

The table also clearly lists the characteristics of epic theatre's form. Epic theatre uses narrative (not plot), episodic (not climactic) scenes, montage (not dramatic development), curves (not linear development), and scenes that jump (not cause and effect). These characteristics are needed as methodological tools to achieve the desired purposes. Since plot tends to draw the spectator into "the story," Brecht introduces the use of narratives, in which the spectator only becomes an observer. Moreover, it is presented episodically with scenes that can jump to any places or time without the spectator's anticipation. This will make the spectator "expelled" from "the story" anytime s/he is drawn into it. Even more surprising, as a montage the scenes can be presented in a series of non-linear scenes in which the spectator could not but think about what is going on on stage.

The stage should also be set differently. Since the spectator is made aware that s/he sees a theatre, not representation of life, Brecht argued that "it is... necessary to drop the assumption that there is a forth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without audience" (Brecht, 1992, p. 136). Curtain, therefore, is no longer useful. The spectator sees the set directly as s/he enters the theater. "Theatre remains theatre" he said (Worthen, 1993, p. 769), it's not a 'slice of life' on stage.

There is also the need of having a different acting style. This is needed to create "the alienation effect, ... to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident" (Brecht, 1992, p. 136). On stage the actor presents a character, not represent him/her. Brecht proposed, "The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Scheiwk; he shows them" (Brecht, 1992, p. 137).

Brecht wanted the spectator to think. Theatre is "an intellectual process" (Boal in Birringer, 1991, p. 14) to Brecht. He didn't want the spectator to see life on stage, but to think about life. He wanted the spectator to see how the theatre "demystifies relationships between individuals and institutions, individuals and individuals, institutions and institutions, so as to show first the nature of passion and economic and

social laws, and second to demonstrate methods by which human beings can control both themselves and their institutions” (Szanto, 1978, p. 76).

THE TRACES OF BRECHT IN POSTMODERN THEATRE

Going into the second half of the century, when politically the two dominant ideologies (liberalism/capitalism and socialism/communism) were engaged in a cold war; modern theatre, in terms of content and form, started to stagger like an old human being. It is most clearly depicted in Beckett: the last of the modernist (Szanto, 1978). Brecht, by then, had been an accepted member of the main-stream modern theatres and no longer considered an avant-garde. The form and content of epic theatre was commonly “quoted” in new experiments. The modern theatre’s experiments, however, showed “a kind of menopause of modernism (which) cohabits with a series of techniques that depict change as the basic order of existence” (Szanto, 1978, p. 162). Commenting on Beckett’s works, Szanto further says that Beckett’s works suggest the frightening implicitness that the late twentieth century concept of art is in profound need of transformation (166). Now that post-modern ideas have started to surface, a new take based on these ideas in theatre has been inevitable.

The table below (see Basuki, 2000), although an oversimplification, will help our understanding about the difference between modernism and postmodernism that influences the theatre. It will also help frame our tracing of postmodernism in Brecht’s epic theatre.

Modernism	Post-modernism
grand design	Local design
ultimate truth	Relative truth
unity	Diversity
uniformity	Variety
objectivity	Subjectivity

The list can go further, but now we can readily see that people have been “tired” of modernist dreams of “general order” in the society. The linear development in technology does not guarantee anything about a better society. Humanity is devaluated until it equals to other factors in

the production process such as natural recourses and technology, so that “the society is decaying” (Fischer in Szanto, 1978, p. 176).

How does theatre react? Ernst Fisher says (in Szanto, 1978) that in a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. He further suggests that, unless it wants to break faith with social function, art must show the world as changeable and help change it. With a set of postmodern beliefs, however, fighting the dream of grand design with another grand design, the old unity with a new unity, the old uniformity with another uniformity, etc. is out of the picture since it is still the same old modern way. To address the decaying society postmodernism does not suggest another system as what modern socialism/communism did. Instead, it “operates” in the existing society, trying to deal with human problems more locally and personally.

In theatre we witness that the (postmodern) avant-garde has been trying to do such efforts. We can see it, for example, in the works of Kushner or Fornes although we can still see the presence of modernism in such works. However, we can still justify it since an avant-garde does not come out of the blue. We see that some of the “ingredients” are taken from modernism. Moreover, some modern works have been far ahead of their contemporaries since some artists have more far reaching vision than the others. One of such artists is, of course, Bertolt Brecht. We shall, therefore, now examine epic theatre’s contribution to post-modern theatre.

First of all we need to examine it in terms of the contents. To argue that post modernism carries a single content is against its characteristics. Unlike epic theatre, postmodern theatre does not try to “oppose” (head to head) anything. However, postmodern theatre also deals with social, political, and cultural problems. In facing the dominant social and political order, for example, some postmodern avant-garde try to “empower” or “transform” the society that is immediate to it.. A good example of such theatre is Augusto Boal’s “theatre of the oppressed.” Boal, of course, owes a lot to Brecht. Even though he doesn’t want to be called as Brecht’s postmodern successor (Jackson in Boal, 1992), his work clearly uses a lot of Brechtian principles such as “social being determines thought” or “argument instead of suggestion” that have long been dealt with by Brecht.

The biggest influence Brecht has made is, of course, in the aesthetic form. Theatre has become an art form “that is both narrative and nonlinear, both individual and collective—a theatre that avoids simple naturalism and unheightened daily experience in order to present social and individual reality on its stages” (Szanto, 1978, p. 165)—in postmodernism. Some of the ideas behind it are clearly rooted in Brecht’s ideas of episodic scenes in his effort to make the spectator think. For example, we can see how big Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America Part I: Millenium Approaches* owes to Brecht’s epic theatre. In fact, Brecht also wrote plays specially written for bourgeois audience, one of which is *Three Penny Opera* (Szanto, 1978). Such plays have surely influenced other writers even though they grow in the “bourgeois” realistic line.

Another influence Brecht has strongly made is in the actor-spectator relationship. There has been postmodern plays that denies “the audience’s passive emotional identification with the central character of conventional realist or expressionist drama” (Birringer, 1991, p. 148) such as in Maria Irene Fornes’ *Fefu And Her Friends*. Although Fornes develops it more from the realist tradition, the idea of moving audience and letting them see the play in different order (in act two)—which gives the idea that the audience see a theatre (not life)—owes a lot to Brecht’s epic theatre. An even further push on the involvement of the audience to “think” is done by Augusto Boal. In his “forum theatre” Boal even encourages the spectator to become spec-actor: they can go up the stage and replace the actor’s role (Boal, 1992, pp. 17-36; 224-245).

Still another influence Brecht has made, however faint, is the interdisciplinary form of the theatre. Brecht, we all know, used poetry, songs, music, even dance in his epic theatre. He used them in a different way from what dramatic opera did since in epic theatre the music, for example, is not used just to heighten, proclaim, and illustrate the text but to set forth the text: the music takes the text for granted and takes up its own attitude (Brecht, 1992). More and more postmodern avant-garde use such interdisciplinary form.

There are of course some characteristics of postmodern theatre that have not been considered by Brecht; devaluing the text, for example. Postmodern artists have come to the idea that a production has its own text: a performance text. It does not simply mean a different interpretation

of the text the way modern directors might think. It is a conscious “political choice” to convey an idea to the audience. For example, a director might cast a red-haired white man as the husband of a black woman, and they have a blond son. With such a choice the performance politically says “in theatre race doesn’t matter”. With such choices theatre is “forcing on to the audience an ever greater awareness that the event on stage is theatre and not natural occurrence” (Szanto, 1978, p. 172). The consequence of devaluating the text is that there might not be any lasting plays in the future. Since the playwright is not “the initiator” of the theatre performance, a play might only serve a single theatre performance and then disappear. “As history moves toward such a theatre, there may well be valuable dramatic experiences even if there are no lasting plays” (172). It may be one of the directions of postmodern theatre.

Brecht’s plays have now been in the cannon. After all, it is a modern theatre, which is no longer avant-garde nowadays. With its strong influence to the succeeding generation, however, his epic theatre is not ‘just another theatre’ in the cannon. It will continue to influence the avant-garde,

“not only because it is great, but because it is exemplary as well.”

Roland Barthes.

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