Bertolt Brecht and Epic Theatre: Crash Course Theater #44

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=c7fqMPDcKXM
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we're hanging out with playwright and poet Bertold Brecht. As theatrical modernists go, Brecht is the lace to Artaud's leather. Or is it the other way around? His plays are hugely literary and staunchly political (surprise, surprise), but they're also designed to wake up the audience, providing a more intense and essential vision of reality. Feeling alienated yet? Lights up!

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

Bertold was born in Augsburg, Germany in 1898. He studied medicine, but he also took classes in theater. In 1924, he apprenticed himself to the director Max Reinhardt. His early works were episodic plays about macho heroes and fragmenting societies in the expressionist style of Ernst Toller or Georg Kaiser.

In the late 1920s, he began to work with the theater director Erwin Piscutor, who we briefly discussed in our episode on Expressionism. One of the first multimedia directors, Piscutor created a theater that was overtly political. He thought that theater could be a means of educating the audience, and boy did he love scaffolding.

Brecht combined Piscutor's technique with elements borrowed from cabaret, silent film, and Shakespeare's history plays to create his own unique style. In 1928, he had maybe his greatest success with *The Threepenny Opera*, a tale of the criminal underclass co-written with the composer Kurt Weill. This became the runaway hit of Weimar Germany.

Brecht, however, sensed that his politics weren't a great fit for Nazi Germany. He left in 1933, first for Denmark, then Sweden and Finland, and then the United States. In exile, he wrote several of his major plays, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo Galilei*, and *The Good Person of Setzuan*, and he formally articulated his theories.

In 1947, he was summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He agreed to testify, but while he didn't name any names, he also didn't win any popularity contests with Hollywood, so he left the US, ultimately resettling in East Germany. Back in Germany, he and his wife, Helene Weigel, created the Berliner Ensemble, a theater company that would perform his texts and put his theories into practice. Brecht died in 1956.

Brecht is credited with developing the idea of epic theater, although Piscutor used the term first. Epic theater is supposed to be the opposite of dramatic theater, and also the opposite of Aristotelian theater. It's largely achieved using the Verfremdungseffekt, or the "V-effekt". That's often translated as the "alienation effect" or the "distancing effect". A better translation is the "estrangement effect".

Why would you want to estrange or alienate an audience? Like a lot of dudes in the non-realist camp, Brecht worried that conventional plays were too easy to sit through. You see a psychologically realistic show, you have all the feels, and then you leave the theater mostly worrying about whether the currywurst stand is still open. And, I mean, currywurst is delicious, but using theater as a mere escape is no way to topple exploitative capitalism.

Instead, Brecht tried to create plays that would force an audience to think critical and uncomfortable thoughts about money, power, and ethics. "Art", he wrote, "is not a mirror with which to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

Yes, this is about waking up an audience, just like Artaud, but it's not about working on an audience's unconscious and waking them up to myth and magic and violence and ritual. Epic theater is about working on their waking brains and waking them up to the political realities just beyond the door of the playhouse. The appeal is intellectual, not emotional. There's no crying in dialectical materialism.

Brecht believed that an estranged audience would be forced to engage with the plays content actively and intellectually. Here's how he put it: "The dramatic theater's spectator says, 'Yes, I have felt like that too—just like me—it's only natural—it'll never change. I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.' The epic theater's spectator says, 'I'd never have thought it—that's not the way—that's extraordinary, hardly believable—it's got to stop. I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.'"

How do you do this? Well, you know how in most productions lights, sound, sets, costumes, and songs, they all sort of work together to produce one coherent vision? Brecht was like, "How about not?" He wanted a theater in which various elements wouldn't integrate but actually sort of cage-fight each other, continuously ejecting the audience from the theatrical illusion. Disbelief will not be suspended.

A good example is in *The Threepenny Opera*, when sweet and virginal Polly Peachum steps out to sing the violent revenge ballad "Pirate Jenny". The audience is supposed to be like, "What? Why would she sing that?" But often, the audience is like, "Hey, this is a fun song!" Because mimesis is powerful, and estrangement is hard.

Brecht also encouraged a style of acting in which actors don't fully embody characters but just sort of gesture at them. Often with an actual repeated symbolic gesture that Brecht called the "gestus". Brecht also provided dialogue in which actors speak about their characters in the third person.

He described this model in his essay "The Street Scene". In the essay, he imagined an eyewitness demonstrating a traffic accident to some bystanders. The witness doesn't try to fully become the driver or the victim. Instead, he gestures at those roles, allowing the bystanders to make up their minds. "The actor is not Lear," Brecht wrote. "He *shows* Lear."

Brecht also cut off interest in story or suspense by describing what would happen at the beginning of a scene, or actually writing it out on a half curtain, because full curtains are too disbelief-suspending. There's often a narrator and a use of signs and placards. He wanted each scene to exist independently and for the audience to have to work out how to put them all together. He was also big on speaking stage directions out loud.

Brecht wrote that he wanted theater to feel like a boxing match. No one attending a boxing match thinks that the guys pummeling each other are doing it because they're super mad at each other. The audience understands that the construct is artificial. That said, maybe Brecht didn't choose the best metaphor, because in boxing the punches are real, and if you've been to a match you'll know that the ringside audience isn't especially distanced.

But here's a funny thing about Brecht's plays: yes, they're episodic and brainy, and they keep reminding you that you are definitely watching a play, but even when they're directed in a V-effekt style, you usually end up pretty engaged with the characters and the story and not necessarily with the dialectics. Curse you, entertainment!

The Threepenny Opera was such a runaway success not because people were so on fire for Brecht rendering London's criminal underworld as an allegory for exploitative labor practices in a play staged as such; it was probably because Kurt Weill wrote some fire tracks. I mean, "Mack the Knife"? Come on! And all that stuff about girls and crimes and general skullduggery—it's pretty fun.

Brecht wrote in a bunch of styles—comedies, dramas, biographies, history plays, musicals, and folk dramas. His plays cover a huge temporal and geographical range too; it's part of the whole estrangement thing. They're smart and playful. They often have really good roles for women, which isn't always a given. And the balance of political dynamics with narrative pull is usually fascinating.

But there's one more thing to know about Brecht. His own labor practices were maybe exploitative too. He had a whole bunch of co-writers, usually women he was involved with, and he almost never gave them credit for their significant contributions, like mostly writing some of the plays. Which I guess maybe partly explains his well written female roles.

Let's look at *The Good Person of Setzuan*, first performed in 1943 with songs by Paul Dessau added later. It's the heartwarming fable of a kindly prostitute who learns to protect herself from exploitation by dressing and acting like a really, really mean dude. It's full of sweet, sweet Brechtian devices, like talking directly to the audience and explaining the action before it happens.

Help us out, Thought Bubble.

A bunch of gods drop in on Setzuan, looking for a really good person. They have trouble finding one until they come to the door of the prostitute Shen Te, who takes them in even though she's penniless. The gods reward Shen Te with money and tell her to continue to be good.

She takes the money, buys a tobacco shop, and tries to be good, but her generosity just makes her a target. She falls for a pilot, Yang Sun, but he steals her money and leaves her pregnant. Then Shen Te has a bright idea: she invents a cousin named Shui Ta, dresses up as him, and orders all of the freeloaders to leave the shop.

Turns out, Shui Ta is really good at business. So good that he turns Shen Te's tobacco shop into a full-on tobacco factory. But this subterfuge is hard on Shen Te. People hear her crying behind a door when only Shui Ta is supposed to be around, and they find some of her clothing.

So they try Shui Ta for murder. Shui Ta convinces the judge to close the courtroom and reveals all. The gods are present, but they leave Shen Te, who cries out, "It's impossible to be good and survive in the real world." In an epilogue, the responsibility is foisted onto the audience: "You should now consider as you go / what sort of measures you would recommend / to help good people to a happy end. / Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust: / There must be happy endings, must, must, must!"

Thanks, Thought Bubble!

Was that happy? In having the same actor play both Shen Te and Shui Ta, Brecht distances us from strictly identifying with the character. And the story creates a dialectical conflict between right moral action and social survival. The gods can't resolve that, can you? Be the change that Shen Te needs to see in the world.

Maybe Brecht never really achieved his goal of turning the theater from a place of entertainment to a place of education. His plays are just too entertaining. But his style became a huge influence on Modern and Postmodern theater, television, and film. Or is that just what Mike Rugnetta would say?

We'll see you next time, when things are going to get absurd. I mean, yes, a gift shop skull on a fly system operated by the show's director is absurd, but we're going to get more absurd. We're going to be exploring the Theater of the Absurd with Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Samuel Beckett, the whole madcap and deeply-pessimistic-about-the-human-condition gang.

Until then, curtain! Which is a device the theater uses to obfuscate the machinery of stagecraft and maintain the illusion of the stage as a location subject to different rules than the so-called "real world", a division which is actually... Hey, come on!

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Thanks for watching.