

**WITH THAT PURPOSE AND THROUGH WHICH  
DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES DOES BRECHT ACHIEVE  
VERFRUMDUNGSEFFEKT IN HIS PLAY “MOTHER  
COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN”?**

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With what purpose and through which dramatic techniques does Brecht achieve the *verfrumdungseffekt* in his play “Mother Courage and Her Children”?

In his work, Bertolt Brecht has very often argued with methods by which modern dramaturgy of his time conveyed the message to the audience. In contrast to Stanislavski’s “Realism”<sup>1</sup>, which tries to immerse the audience into the performance and make them sympathize the protagonist by letting the audience follow the characters’ emotions and experiences and understand the message that the author is implying, Brecht’s Epic Theatre (also sometimes referred as “Brechtian Theatre”) takes a polar opposite route to achieve the goal. Brecht viewed the method of creating an illusion of a real action as escapism<sup>2</sup>; instead of using the traditional methods of delivering the message to the audience that developed in dramaturgy for hundreds of years, Brecht’s ideas departed from more modern theatre directions as Antonin Artaud<sup>3</sup>, whose performances concentrated on affecting the audience psychologically, rather than through sympathy or apathy. Similarly, in order to portray a certain socio-political issue during an Epic Theatre the actors would often interact with the audience. In result, Brecht developed a completely different theatre style that was in essence different to others; the function of Epic Theatre is to educate the audience by letting them see the global issues of the play from a criticizing perspective, without getting emotionally attached to the action. Brecht introduced groundbreaking

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<sup>1</sup> Banham, Martin, ed. 1998. "Brecht, Bertolt" In *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> *University of Southern Queensland*. A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12

<sup>3</sup> Banham, Martin, ed. 1998. "Brecht, Bertolt" In *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

techniques, which he presented in one of his written works “Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic”. In this book he also established a key principle of “Epic” Theatre; he said: “It is most important that one with the main features of the ordinary theatre should be from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion”<sup>4</sup>. Saying this, Bertolt Brecht introduced the *verfremdungseffekt* – one of the most important elements of Brechtian Theatre, which in translation from German means “making strange effect”, or simply making an alienation effect. The concept behind this element is to let the audience be aware that they are watching a staged performance, rather than a scene from real life. Brecht used to apply many theatrical techniques in his productions to create and maintain the *verfremdungseffekt*, such as the “breaking the fourth wall”, the *gestus*, or putting in musical, singing scenes.

All of these techniques are actively used in one of Brecht’s masterpiece “Mother Courage and Her Children” achieving didacticism<sup>5</sup> and alternatively making it one of the most significant plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When studying this play from a closer position, it is vital to consider the political activities at that time, which largely inspired Brecht in his work. Written in the year of 1949, “Mother Courage and Her Children” was largely influenced by the ongoing Second World War, during which Brecht was forced to flee the Nazi Germany to Scandinavia in 1933<sup>6</sup> due to his leftist leanings. The play itself was a direct reaction to the Nazi invasion of Poland the same year the play was written<sup>7</sup>. Influenced by the horror of the on going war, Bertolt

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<sup>4</sup> Bertolt, Brecht “Brecht on Theatre”, page 122

<sup>5</sup> University of Southern Queensland. A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12

<sup>6</sup> A bibliography of Brecht and his work <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/brecht.htm>

<sup>7</sup> National Arts Center. An introduction to the play “Mother Courage and her Children” and the Epic Theatre [www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/bertolt\\_brecht\\_001.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/bertolt_brecht_001.html) last visited 30/03/12

Brecht displayed the social conflict in his work, representing it through the characters and their actions in “Mother Courage and Her Children”. Set in the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century during the “Thirty Years War” in Europe (the action of the play overlaps the middle 12 years of the war)<sup>8</sup>, the play is an obvious allusion to the Second World War. Similarly, Brecht’s other works, such as the plays “Life of Galileo” or “How Much is your Iron” are largely driven by socio-political and socio cultural issues of the world. From here we can infer that Epic Theatre is always an allusion to the real world problems. For instance, though the action of “Mother Courage and Her Children”, Brecht is trying to teach his audience that society has changed under influence of violence. As discussed before, Brecht does not convey the message through sentimental feelings towards the protagonist Mother Courage, but instead allows the audience to criticize her actions and from there derive the message by themselves. Though several dramatic techniques he manages to create the “verfrumdungseffekt”, or “jar” the members of the audience, allowing them to have a birds-eye view on the socio-political or socio-cultural issue, rather than see it myopically, looking at the it through the biased eyes of the protagonist<sup>9</sup>.

To establish the verfrumdungseffekt several “Brechtian” techniques have to be respected and complied. For instance, the actors have to present their characters in a specific way: Brecht believed, that the character is not supposed to be an “impersonation”, meaning that the characters should not be sympathetic to the audience, otherwise there is a risk of them becoming emotionally attached and thus

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<sup>8</sup> National Arts Center. An introduction to the play “Mother Courage and her Children” and the Epic Theatre [www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/bertolt\\_brecht\\_001.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/bertolt_brecht_001.html) last visited 30/03/12

<sup>9</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*.

their opinion becoming prejudiced<sup>10</sup>. For instance, in “Mother Courage and Her Children”, Anna Fierling, the protagonist is a very grotesque and emotionally repelling character. That impression comes to the audience since the character prefers to mind her trading business rather than pay attention to her children, which is why she loses all three of them in result. This is purposed to create an emotional distance between the character and the audience, allowing them to concentrate on the plot, rather than on the characters. The German playwright thought that the actor should present a narration of the actions of the character, rather than display the character itself – all this is clearly described by Brecht himself in his book “Brecht on Theatre”<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the goal for an actor of an Epic Theatre is to play the character believably, without violating the *verfrumdungseffekt*. This means that the image of a staged production must never be broken, to prevent the audience from developing an emotional bond with the character. Therefore no characters in Brechtian theatre are complete individuals with their own personal issues. Instead, the issues of each character contribute to the development of the grand socio-political or socio-cultural issue. Epic Theatre shows human nature as a collective image of all characters, thus the Brechtian theatre is always about the development of the plot, rather than development of the individual characters.

To help his actors convey the emotion without violating the *verfrumdungseffekt*, Bertolt Brecht, specifically for Epic Theatre, has developed a theatrical technique – the *gestus*, also often referred to as a “Social Gest”. *Gestus*, as opposed to a simple emotion, is consisted of a gesture *and* a social meaning,

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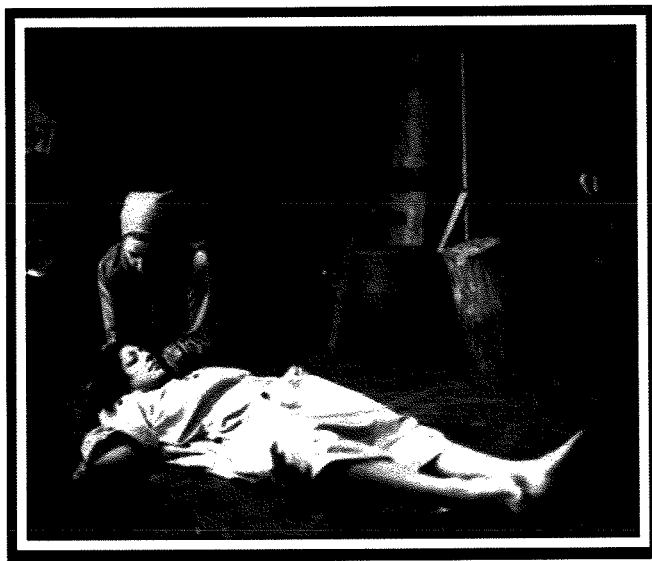
<sup>10</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*.

<sup>11</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*.

combined into one action or a display (image). It allows the observers to understand the conflict / issue that is displayed on stage. For instance, at the end of the second scene of “Mother Courage and Her Children”, where Mother Courage beats her son, that scene on its own only displays the common conflict of “parents and sons”, but considering the social background that Eilif endangered his life by signing up for the army as a soldier, this situation also introduces an additional theme that “war is dangerous, and even more dangerous for “little people” “, which lasts throughout the play and sets the atmosphere in this particular scene. The scene in “Mother Courage and Her Children” where the use of gestus is the most powerful, is when the protagonist loses her second son Swiss Cheese, who was executed for hiding information from the authority. Mother Courage is forced to identify the body of her child and say that she has never seen him to save herself. As she sees the dead body, Mother Courage looks at the audience with a destroyed glance, sometimes referred to as a “silent scream”<sup>12</sup>. The action of glancing over at the audience does not stand for any emotion specifically, however it is the concatenation of circumstances and the social issue in the background that makes the glance so meaningful and conveys the emotion precisely. The social issue that helps create the gestus is that if Mother Courage gives a sense that she recognizes her child in the executed body, she and her last daughter will get into trouble with the authority. An other example of gestus is in the final 12th scene of the play, where Mother Courage is bent over her dead daughter.

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<sup>12</sup> *University of Southern Queensland*. A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12



*Figure 1*

Figure one shows a photo of this scene. Anna Fierling is bent over Kattrin's corpse. Her position alone only portrays an emotion of sadness, however together with the background behind her death (Courage's ignorance and dedication to her business), this scene becomes more powerful and allows the audience to have a stronger emotional experience, whilst being able to analyze the scene critically. Because of the gestus technique, the action of an "Epic" production is able generate a strong emotional impact on the audience, without violating the *verfrumdungseffekt*.

The Second scene of the play clearly displays how Bertolt Brecht achieves the effect of alienation of the audience through an other "Brechtian" technique "breaking the fourth wall", which refers to allowing a direct contact with the audience. The scene begins with SIMON SCHAMA presenting the scene to the audience: (see Figure 2)



## Scene Excerpt from *Mother Courage and Her Children*

### SCENE TWO

*Gunfire fades to music with a voice over of Simon Schama.*

SCHAMA        In the years 1625 and 1626, Mother Courage journeys across Livonia in the baggage train of the Swedish Army. In the second scene before the fortress of Wallhof, she meets her son again, and celebrates the successful sale of a capon.

TRANSLATOR    Capon. A male chicken or rooster.

SOLDIER        Scene two!

*Livonia, before the fortress of Wallhof. Summer 1626. The stage is divided in two like a diptych. Stage Right: the Swedish Commander's tent. Stage Left: the kitchen. In the kitchen, the cook is chopping carrots and arguing with Mother Courage, who tries to sell him a chicken.*

### Figure 2

A separate character that does not have any affect on the plot is the TRANSLATOR who clarifies a meaning of a word to make sure that the audience is on the same page with the performers. After that, an acting character SOLDIER marks the beginning of the scene. The term “fourth wall” refers to the separation between the audience and the action on stage<sup>13</sup>. Thus, by “breaking the wall”, the playwright makes the action more open and interactive with the audience. By having the actors directly address the audience, break out of character and be aware that they are watched, the playwright reminds the spectators that they are watching a show rather than a scene<sup>14</sup>. Thus suspension of disbelief is no longer present. Brecht calls his audience “observers”, rather than “spectators”, highlighting that his audience is aware that it observes an artificial show<sup>15</sup>. This distraction from the flow of the play creates and maintains an emotional distance between the characters and the audience

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<sup>13</sup> *University of Southern Queensland. A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre* <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12

<sup>14</sup> *University of Southern Queensland. A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre* <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12

<sup>15</sup> *National Arts Center. An introduction to the play “Mother Courage and her Children” and the Epic Theatre* [www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/bertolt\\_brecht\\_001.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/bertolt_brecht_001.html) last visited 30/03/12

and thus gives it an ability to think rationally, without being attached to the characters and thus able to soberly evaluate the characters' actions, judging them from a perspective of an "ethical referee"<sup>16</sup>.

Bertolt Brecht needs the audience to have a powerful emotional experience for the purposes of learning, as he describes in his books<sup>17</sup>. To enhance the emotional experience the German playwright puts songs in the script, listening to which the audience learns more about the global issues of the play through the characters, who would often share their own experiences and emotions through those songs. In "Mother Courage and Her Children, for instance, the characters sing multiple times during the performance. During every song the audience goes through strong emotional experiences, which help it make connections with the global issues presented in the play. For instance, most of the songs would be extremely grotesque, reflecting the horror of war – while the music played in the background is happy and cheerful, the lyrics of the songs are very sharp and may have disturbing, ironic meaning. Often the songs also contribute to the development of characters such as Mother Courage herself. The play ends with two songs – in the last, 12<sup>th</sup> scene Courage singing her dead daughter a lullaby, followed by the soldiers singing Mother Courage's signature song. The scene resolves in the protagonist's decision to stay confident and let her emotions go as she did when she lost the other two of her children – she says "I must get back into business" and calls to the passing regiment. As she does, the soldiers sing her signature song. The musical ending of the play makes it very tragic, enhances the emotional experience of the audience and thus helps them learn from the performance.

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<sup>16</sup> *National Arts Center*. An introduction to the play "Mother Courage and her Children" and the Epic Theatre [www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/bertolt\\_brecht\\_001.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/bertolt_brecht_001.html) last visited 30/03/12

<sup>17</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*.

The maintenance of the *verfrumdungseffekt* is a key element of any Epic Theatre production, as it contributes to the process of teaching the audience. Most of the sources that I have included in this research eventually come to this conclusion, for example, the National Arts Center introduction to the play begins the discussion of the “Brechtian” elements with this statement. The effect may be achieved through numerous different theatre elements in an “Epic” performance, such as the “breaking the fourth wall”, the *gestus* and application of musical scenes. The main purpose of the effect is to allow the audience to look at the socio-political or socio-cultural issue in the play from a critical perspective and be able to learn from the experience.

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*University of Southern Queensland.* A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12

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Banham, Martin, ed. 1998. "Brecht, Bertolt" In *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brecht, Bertolt, "Mother Courage and Her Children", Penguin Classics, Ed. and trans. by John Willet and Ralph Manheim, 1939

## Images

1. Figure 1: a photo from the 12th scene of “Mother Courage and her Children”, entitled "Mother Courage and the dead Katrin", has been uploaded by [alexthea](#) on Wednesday, January 18th, 2012
2. Figure 2: Scene Excerpt from “Mother Courage and Her Children”, taken from the National Arts Center introduction to the play “Mother Courage and her Children”,  
25/03/12

# Critique of Sources

## Online Sources

1. A bibliography of Brecht and his work <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/brecht.htm> last visited 30/03/12

This source at kirjasto.sci.fi is a detailed bibliography of Bertolt Brecht's life, written by Bember Gasgoigne, a famous British television presenter, journalist and author. The work was very helpful to me, as the bibliography helped me understand Brecht, what influenced him and thus understand Epic Theatre in root. Understanding Brecht's intentions therefore made it much easier for me to make deductions of the theatre practice and thus this bibliography is a fairly valuable source for my research. This source also makes a very clear overview of Brecht's life and may be used by any curious student or researcher in order to learn about the background of Brecht's Epic Theatre. The reliability of the source is not under question, considering a high writing rank of the author.

2. *National Arts Center*. An introduction to the play "Mother Courage and her Children" and the Epic Theatre  
[www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/bertolt\\_brecht\\_001.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/bertolt_brecht_001.html) last visited 30/03/12

This source is an introduction to the play "Mother Courage and Her Children", as well as an introduction to the Epic Theatre philosophy. This was perhaps the most useful source for my Research Investigation, because it contained a little bit of everything: a brief bibliography, basic philosophy behind the theatrical practice, as well as a brief history of the Thirty Years War, and the World War II, the two events which have a direct connection to the

play. Having read this source I had a clear outline of the key elements of the Epic Theatre, together with information about what inspired Brecht to write the play and was able to form a general structure of my essay. This source may also be very valuable to other researchers who seek a general knowledge about the famous play “Mother Courage and her Children”. Because this source also provides additional information such as the key elements of the theatre style, as well as the author’s philosophy, this source allows the researcher have a better understanding of the theatre practice as a whole.

It is also unreasonable to question the reliability of this source. National Arts Center is an honored publisher with over 40 years of history with positive reflections from readers.

3. *University of Southern Queensland*. A collection of traits and techniques of Epic Theatre

<http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mothercourage/Brechtian%20Techniques> last visited 30/03/12

Primarily this source is a School Resource of a University of Queensland. It contains a large amount of practical information on the play “Mother Courage and Her Children”. It contains a list of elements and techniques of Epic Theatre, as well as their implications in practice. It was incredibly useful for my Research Investigation, as it had more details on the practical elements of Epic Theatre. It had a detailed description of each element, giving me material to relate to some of the other practitioners besides Bertolt Brechet, allowing me to have a broader picture of how Epic Theory can be used in practice. This source also helped me to come up with conclusions and deductions about the implication of the theatre style and connect with the philosophy of Brechtian Theatre. Thus, this school resource may be used by any researcher who wishes to learn more specific details about the theatre practice, or wish to find explanation and theory behind the practical elements that they saw on stage.

It is also unreasonable to question the reliability of the sources because it is in the database of a prestigious performance arts university in Australia.

### Published Sources

1. Brecht, Bertolt.. "*Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*". Ed. and trans. John Willett. British edition. London: Methuen. 1964

This is a book by Bertolt Brecht himself, about his Epic Theatre. This source was also very helpful for my research, as it gave me additional information to work with and more material to cover, exploring the Epic Theatre even further. The fact that the source is written by B. Brecht himself (although translated) adds a large amount of reliability and value for my research investigation. Specifically, this source helped me make connections between the philosophy of the theatre practice with its practical aspect. In general this source would come very handy to a researcher who is already familiar with the basics of the Brechtian Theatre, whereas a reader who was just introduced to the theatre style would find the source confusing. The reliability of the translation cannot be under question – the John Willett is a Harvard graduate and is well known for his translation across the world.

2. Banham, Martin. "*Brecht, Bertolt*" In *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998.

This book is a collection of theatre practices, containing general information about theatre styles. It is the first source I read before deciding to do the Research Investigation on Epic Theatre. It gave me a general understanding of what Epic Theatre is about, as well as background information about Bertolt Brecht. This source makes connections between theatre



styles, which makes it ideal for a starting researcher who is interested in theatre in general, in its development with time and society. However, this book does not give much specific information about each theatre style, and thus becomes less valuable for researchers who seek further examination of the theatre practice. Reliability of this source is unquestionable, because it was published by Cambridge, one of the most prestigious universities around the world.

3. Brecht, Bertolt, "Mother Courage and Her Children", Penguin Classics, Ed. and trans. by John Willet and Ralph Manheim, 1939

This is the script of the "Mother Courage and Her Children" play by Bertolt Brecht, edited and translated by John Willet and Ralph Manheim. There are no reasons to question the reliability of the translated work, as it was done by two exceptional masters of their art John Willet and Ralph Manheim. This source is one of the fundamental sources in this research, as it gave an example of an ideal Epic Theatre production. Reading the script I was able to make connections with the done research and knowledge about the philosophy of the theatre style. For instance, I learned how exactly the fourth wall is being broken, which helped me understand the theatre style as a whole. The script is definitely one of the most important sources for any researcher who intends to learn more about Epic Theatre, as it helps make the connections between the done research and its practical implications.

## Images

Figure 1: a photo from the 12th scene of “Mother Courage and her Children”, entitled "Mother Courage and the dead Katrin", has been uploaded by alexthea on Wednesday, January 18th, 2012

Figure 2: Scene Excerpt from “Mother Courage and Her Children”, taken from the National Arts Center introduction to the play “Mother Courage and her Children”, 25/03/12

In order to illustrate the point of argument and support it with a concrete source, an image with excerpt from script, as well as a picture of a scene was pasted into the essay. Seeing an excerpt from the script is useful because it allows me to make direct connections with the play. The Picture is also very valuable to the essay, as it helps to illustrate the point, being a specific example. There is no reason to question reliability of the two images, as they come from reliable sources.