

## How is the he Alienation Effect in Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children Achieved?

Epic theatre flourished in the 1920's and 30's in Germany during the "Weimar Republic" times. It was mostly practiced in left wing theatres and cabarets. Brecht's dislike of developing naturalistic style of theatre caused him to emphasize on a theatre style, which would expand further than an entertaining performance. Epic Theatre was developed under the influence of a Marxism theory and that man and society could be intellectually analyzed, which led the creation of Epic Theatre through Bertolt Brecht.<sup>1</sup> Epic Theatre consists of different stylistic aspects that make up the theatre style in order to convey the Marxist influence, such as alienation technique, didacticism, breaking the fourth wall, acting techniques, *gestus* and narration and song.

The alienation technique or known as the *Verfremdungseffekt* was created in order to create a distance between the audience and the characters. Brecht did not agree with theatre's approach of escapism for the audience and creating the connection between characters and the audience. The alienation technique could be achieved only through breaking that connection and persuading the audience to critically analyze the characters and their actions, through manipulative plots and heightened emotion. The *Verfremdungseffekt*, which can be translated to the 'making strange effect' seeking to make the familiar strange, was seen as the basis of the alienation effect.<sup>2</sup> The distance should be remained at all times between the audience and the actors, then only can the audience be critical of the performance and be challenged rather than a shallow observer.

Didacticism in Brecht's theatre style is an important aspect, because Brecht believed that it is important to teach the audience or inform them of a message. The didactic plays can be seen through Brecht's Marxist ideas being used front of stage in his creations, due to the influence of Marxism in his theatre style. Furthermore, didacticism can be seen influence major parts of the performances such as breaking the fourth wall. Breaking the fourth wall is a method when the actors interact with the audiences, through breaking the imaginary wall between the audience and the stage. The method was done in order to achieve creating suspicion and breaking the actor from their character, which would lead to the audience being faced with the reality of the play, and the performance piece lacking the reality.<sup>3</sup> The Brechtian methods are foundations of the *Verfremdungseffekt*; the strange effect cannot be achieved without the combination of all the methods previously mentioned and the methods to be mentioned. Such as, the acting techniques, which is the formation of the actor's character being made up of impersonal and contradicting gestures for the character. Brecht's theatre did not show the "human nature but revealed collective human relations."<sup>4</sup> Acting in Epic Theatre means playing characters believably without convincing the audience or themselves that they are the character. The focus of Epic Theatre is on conveying a message through an interpretation, without entertaining the audience and challenging them with questions.

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<sup>1</sup> 1995, Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>2</sup> Jameson, F. *Brecht and Method*. Verso, London, 2000

<sup>3</sup> 2009, University of Queensland Archives, Brecht

<sup>4</sup> 2009, University of Queensland Archives, Brecht

Furthermore, another important method in Brecht's Epic Theatre, which is used as a form of alienation, is Gestus. Gestus is a theatrical technique, which attends to explain the emotion within the character and the context. It is a combination of a gesture that raises a social meaning, causing the emphasis on the social conflicts depicted by the performance. Gestus is also a method of alienating the audience by introducing a non-realistic way of presenting them to see the 'bigger picture' of a situation.<sup>5</sup> Continually, the use of Narrative and Song is very important in the alienation effect; Brecht showed his own form of contrast in his plays by creating narrations through songs that were very opposite to the action on stage. For example, in a funeral the use of a very happy song, would alienate the audience causing them to question the theory behind the method of such.

Brecht's methods form Epic Theatre and are all the points are relevant to each other, causing a collaborative process, which creates the main concept of alienation. Alienation is the strange effect in charge of forcing the audience to question the character's motives and the play's message. Epic Theatre was created as a political statement in the late 20's and early 30's, Brecht's focus of theatre contradicted other forms of theatre, especially the naturalistic form such as Stanislavski's realism.

Brecht's theatre style is seen on many of his plays, and in this case, Mother Courage and Her Children. The play is about the constant battles Mother Courage and her children are faced with along the Swedish Army. Mother Courage is mostly interested in her cart, rather than her children's well being, which causes the gestus in the play. Although, Brecht's alienation method was the focus of the play, it wasn't considered as so, due to the play being written while Brecht was on exile during WWII, causing the audience to sympathize with the characters and the plot. However, the attempts of Brecht seen to keep the disruption of that connection is seen through Mother Courage's character and her actions written by Brecht. Which are very hard to sympathize with, causing the alienation effect to still be seen.

There are certain quotations, which support the alienation theory in Mother Courage and Her Children, such as seen with the use of music written by Brecht as a narrative tool and alienation method.

Mother Courage:

(Sung)

*A long time ago when I was young,  
I thought I was above it all,  
I'd order waiters to serve me right,  
And threaten them that heads would fall.  
Then from the roof top a starling sang;  
Give it just a year or two,  
And I promise it won't be long,*

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<sup>5</sup> Jameson, F. *Brecht and Method*. Verso, London, 2000

*You'll learn to follow other's rules.  
Listen to my song.  
Man proposes: God disposes,  
Then tell me right from wrong.*<sup>6</sup>

The song sung by Mother Courage is during the scene when she is listening to a soldier's complaint and while she is in the line to make a complaint herself. The song is in order to teach a lesson to the soldier, which ends up working for herself too. Singing in the middle of the play is not a foreign factor in Epic theatre, it is used to disrupt the audience, by causing them to question the motive of the song. Everything that Brecht includes in his plays has a purpose, such as this song, which indicates Mother Courage's submission to the rules of the government and her persuasion for the soldier to as well. Brecht has said that this is Courage's most depraved moment in the play, because it is ironic to what she is doing, which is waiting in line to complain herself.

Brecht's use of song and narration displays the use of alienation in practice. The audiences do not expect the strange effect to occur, as such because Courage shows that she is also waiting in line herself. However, through the song number she tries to convince the soldier as well as convince herself to submit to the rules of the government. Which is very contradicting according to her characteristic in the play, indicating the practice of alienation by Brecht.

Another form of alienation can be viewed as breaking the illusion of the play, such as making it clear to the audience that this is a play and not reality therefore, breaking the connection between the audience and the actor. Which can be seen in a quote by the cook:

Cook:

*You all know honest Socrates  
Who always spoke the truth  
They owed him thanks for that,  
you'd think But what happened?  
Why, they put hemlock in his drink  
And swore that he misled the youth.  
How honest was this Socrates!  
Yet long before the day was out  
The consequence was clear, alas:  
His honesty had brought him to this pass.  
A man is better off without.*<sup>7</sup>

The cook's references to Socrates and his causes of death is a familiar reference to Mother Courage and her children, indicating the deaths of her children and how Courage

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<sup>6</sup> 1991, Mother Courage and Her Children; Brecht, Bertolt.

<sup>7</sup> 1991, Mother Courage and Her Children; Brecht, Bertolt.

is better off without her truth, because all it does is cause her ruin. Brecht challenging the audience can be seen in this excerpt, the use of the allegory to Mother Courage and her children is not very out there, therefore requires to be questioned. The use of the song shows that Brecht wants to question his audience through song once again, the contrasting relationship between the song and the action on stage creates the alienation effect once again.

Brecht's use of song is usually contrasting in order to create the alienation effect, caused by strangeness. Brecht depicts this effect in Mother Courage and Her Children continuously through contrasting music or lyrics in scenes, which causes the audience to be investigative and impose questions.

Brecht is constantly challenging his audience especially with the use of his techniques, which is what makes up Epic Theatre in terms of a political theatre style. Brecht's use of alienation in creating a distance between the audience and the character can be witnessed in the conclusion of Mother Courage, when Courage begins to roll her cart all alone.

Courage:

*I hope I can pull the wagon by myself. Yes, I'll manage, there's not much in it now. I must get back into business.*<sup>8</sup>

The final scene shows the attempt to break the connection with the audience, this is a scene where Courage has lost all her children and instead of mourning shows signs of worry for her business. Indicating that she doesn't care much for the loss of her children. Brecht shows that Courage is a character who is difficult for the audience to empathize with, almost impossible. Especially in the last scene, Brecht completely makes her to be a bad mother, who no one wants to empathize with, by showing that she only cares about her cart and not her children. The attempt of alienating the audience shows success due to his ending Courage as a stereotypically said, 'bad mother' causing the audience to no longer associate themselves with her as they would want to. Brecht's works mostly focus on the contrasting factor, which can be seen in this scene by Courage. Her focus is on the cart instead of her children, causing the dramatic tension to be let down. Indicating that Brecht has successfully created an Epic Theatre performance, which followed his methods.

The audience is left with a take away of usually questions created such as, why does Mother courage care more about her cart than her children? Or isn't she upset that her children died? Etc. Brecht's Epic Theatre is created in order to raise questions from the audience. Brecht didn't believe theatre to be a form of escapism such as Stanislavsky's realism, where the audience would be able to empathize with the characters and create a bond, which would make them feel as though they were a part of the performance. Instead, Brecht aimed to create a theatre style that would contradict escapism. Brecht was influenced by Marxism and created performances,

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<sup>8</sup> 1991, Mother Courage and Her Children; Brecht, Bertolt.

which would involve the bourgeoisie to be on the roller coaster of misjudgment. Brecht aimed to leave the audience with questions that would develop themselves into the message of the play, through the use of alienation and other methods of Epic Theatre such as breaking the fourth wall, narration, etc.

The alienation effect causes the audience to be distanced from the performance and the actors. Which enforces them to be critical about the performance instead of being entertained. The strange occurrences of events, relationships or narrations cause the audience to analyze the performance instead of living the performance, which is what Brecht had intended with his theatre style. Also, as seen in *Mother Courage and her children* the use of creating the protagonist to be an unlikable character can cause alienation as well, by disrupting the empathy the audience members felt for the character. Therefore, once again they become critical of the character and begin to ask questions as to *why* she was as such, until they understand Brecht's message of the performance.

### **Critique of Sources**

*Encyclopedia Britannica* is a trustworthy source, created by professionals, however although the one I used was from 1995, the methods and Brecht information was still the same. Therefore, it is correct information.

*Brecht and Method* is a written paper on Brecht and his Methods by F. Jameson in 2000, which indicates that it is more recent and the source has been published internationally and is therefore trustworthy.

*University of Queensland Archives: Brecht* this website was very informative and helpful, it is also the most recent source used in order to gather background information and information about the methods of Brecht.

*Mother Courage and Her Children*, was the copy I used in order to get the quotes to provide examples. It is a 1991 copy of the Brechtian play translated into English. The information must have been trustworthy.