

IB Theatre Higher Level

Research Investigation

Epic Theatre: *Which Brechtian performance techniques should be used by an actor to achieve the alienation effect in the role of Mother Courage in Scene 12 of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children"?*

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Which Brechtian performance techniques should be used by actors in order to achieve the alienation effect for Mother Courage in Scene 12 of *Mother Courage and Her Children*?

Bertolt Brecht's 1939 play entitled *Mother Courage and Her Children* has been widely regarded as one of the most influential 20th century plays, his 'greatest work'¹, and a brilliant example of Epic Theatre. Scene 12 of *MCHC* is its denouement: the aftermath of the climactic death of Katrin in Scene 11 and the preparations of Mother Courage to continue her commercial exploitations of the ongoing war, leaving her dead daughter in the hands of strangers. As an actor preparing to and portraying the title character of Mother Courage in this culminating scene, it is essential to relate closely to the ideology of Epic theatre – and thus, alienation and distance from the audience. To this end, the actor would be expected to portray an array of Epic performance techniques that promote alienation – involving the audience, physicality, intonation and approach of distance from one's character.

Influenced by Marxism and the Russian avant-garde², Brecht sought to produce plays that would *demonstrate*³, rather than parallel the real world. To this end, he created the idea of the *Verfrumdungseffekt* – his version of the “concept of *ostranenie (distancing)*”⁴, applied already in Chinese theatre. This element, applied to the acting process, lay on the belief that the “actor wants to give the impression of something *strange*”⁵, eventually making him observe himself as a “stranger”⁶ and creating distance and separation between the character and the actor. The alienation effect worked alongside the idea of Epic theatre as a “didactic play... for the actors as much as for the spectators”⁷, because it succeeded in presenting actors that were able to step back and view their characters critically on a social level, presenting contradictions and balanced views⁸ to the audience. In effect, the audience was always made aware that they were watching a show, which was one of the main principles of Epic theatre.

Much of the performance techniques were dictated by the theoretical approach that the actors had to undertake in order to understand Epic Theatre. One of the foundations was the full understanding of character, which made it possible for actors to later step away from their characters and present them, not be them. Brecht believed that first, the actor has to identify and understand their character. Be fluid in their verse and expressive in their gestures, and yet see themselves as a ‘stranger’⁹. This meant that the first and only concrete rehearsal process was the constant *re-reading* of the script¹⁰. This would ‘safeguard against unduly, impulsive and uncritical creation of characters’¹¹. In effect, the actor had to ‘refrain’¹² from being involved with his character, and at the same time be able to ‘contradict’ their character and be ‘astounded’¹³ by the choices they make. This worked together with the concept that of creating *objectives and super-tasks* that lay across scenes

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/sep/08/tony-kushner-mother-courage>.

² Benedetti, p183

³ Books LLC, p24

⁴ Benedetti, p192

⁵ *Ibid*, p192

⁶ *Ibid*, p192

⁷ Benjamin, p20

⁸ Benedetti, p195

⁹ Benedetti, p192

¹⁰ Brecht, p137

¹¹ *Ibid*, p137

¹² *Ibid*, p137

¹³ *Ibid*, p 137

and the whole play to guide the actors. In Epic theatre, the ‘actor’s reference point was always to be the meaning of the play’¹⁴, according to J.L. Styan. The actors studied and rehearsed the play in bits rather than in larger pieces, they had to know what happened directly before their scene and they placed a large importance on plot rather than the development of character. This allowed them to understand the larger picture and focus on the social interactions that they have with other characters rather than themselves specifically.

The approach to empathy was crucial to the understanding of performance techniques. To be at one with their characters, actors required a side of empathy, “not renouncing empathy entirely”¹⁵, and a critical side. However, Brecht argues that empathy, although part of the rehearsal process, is not part of the performance – it is achieved at an earlier stage¹⁶. They had to *show* rather than *imitate*¹⁷. They had to *show* Lear, not *be* Lear¹⁸. To this end, Brecht questioned the nature of modern acting – “why should an actor give the audience an emotional experience when he could give them an opportunity to learn?”¹⁹ and created the notion of ‘*demonstration*’²⁰. This was done effectively through the rehearsal process where the actors were at first trained to understand their characters as *stereotypes* rather than individuals: this focused their attention to the plot and overall interaction with other characters, as well as creating a clear, critical, viewpoint of the characters they were playing. Actors would “observe the world around them” and “amplify it”, for it was “too subtle and spoke too softly”²¹. The use of stereotypes helped the actors detach themselves from any emotion and empathy they could have for a three-dimensional character by creating a simplistic representation of a figure in society. Stereotypes would later be applied on stage as well. In Scene 12 of *Mother Courage*, an actor would be encouraged to view the character of Mother Courage as a stereotype of emotionless inhumanity, for example – especially when she leaves her daughter’s corpse in the hands of strangers. Drawing from stereotypes helped define physicality and intonation, and were specifically helpful in being able to view a character separate from the actor – an actor could step back and see their character as a representation of society rather than an individual to empathize with. In essence, stereotypes would be vital to an actor of *Mother Courage*, as a means to gain distance and understanding of her character.

Stereotypes could be used with humor in practice. When building a character in Epic theatre, one must rely “not on psychology, but on what the character does, how he interacts with the other characters and how they perceive him”²². A useful technique was the use of “*Spass*”²³. This comedic element was used to further distance the actor and the character, by seeing the character in a comedic light. This would identify the comedic and tragic juxtapositions in the play, as well as alienate the actor from the character by use of the grotesque stereotypes encouraged during this process.

The modern theatre, in particular Stanislavski, had believed in the existence of four walls around the stage, with one that separated the actor and the audience. And yet in Brecht’s acting

¹⁴ Styan, p142

¹⁵ Brecht, p136

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p137

¹⁷ Styan, p142

¹⁸ Brecht, p137

¹⁹ Benedetti, p189

²⁰ Books LLC, p7

²¹ *Ibid*, p2

²² Benedetti, p 189

²³ <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/brecht.pdf>

technique arsenal, it is clear that the *fourth wall* is meant to be, and often is, broken by the actors. This is done in practice through the objective viewpoint of the character – “the actor would speak with a certain reserve, repeat an action slowly, stop to explain to the audience what he was doing.”²⁴ In theory, the actor “should never act as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him... The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator”²⁵. Some actors would play multiple roles²⁶, for example. The use of song was also used to break the fourth wall.

In Scene 12, the use of song is key to its performance, because song interrupted heightened action and reminded the audience that they were still watching a performance rather than real life. Song that portrayed a character’s attitude was called ‘gestic’, and Scene 12 has two representations of such music, each portraying a different social attitude. During the gestic music, the actors portray a different attitude to that which they have been using in their character, addressing themselves exclusively and ‘completely’²⁷ to the audience and becoming less of a character and more of an ‘accomplice’²⁸ of the playwright and a means for professing the plot. It follows that the use of song would break the fourth wall, with the actors often addressing their songs to the audience with expressive emotion, rather than ‘hasty’ asides like in realism. In Scene 12, the two contrasting song would portray the two sides of Mother Courage and allow for a final judgment on her character.

An example of use of song to break the fourth wall can be seen in the following image, where Mother Courage is played by Meryl Streep:



Fig 1. Meryl Streep as Mother Courage.

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2006/08/22/arts/Courage1190.jpg>

Actors nevertheless retained an aspect of *realism*. For example, although in Berlin, where Helene Weigel had played Mother Courage in 1949, she had done so with a “cool, relaxed and ironical” nature by “standing outside the role and acting with great precision of movement and

²⁴ Styan, p141

²⁵ Books LLC, p12

²⁶ *Ibid*, p16

²⁷ Styan, p143

²⁸ McTeague, p40

intonation”, she also employed a variety of “realistic” detail²⁹. In the Scene 12 of that production, she “hesitated” as she was paying the peasants for Kattrin’s funeral³⁰, afterwards “accentuating the gesture by the click of her bag”³¹. She then began to drag the cart for the last time, effectively portraying the “contradictory and unpredictable human nature”³². This aspect of realism worked in fact to build up more epic aspect into the show, and therefore it is advised for actors to not step too far back from their characters and allow for the audience to see a lesson on stage not devoid of social comment.

Therefore, for an actor to portray their character in true Brechtian Epic Theatre, it does not mean to fully let go of the realistic element of life. However, there was an attempt at keeping plot as a central point of the play through acting – primarily intonation and voice. Brecht commented on the *narrative* approach³³ to intonation in the acting of his wife, Helene Weigel:

*When an actress was playing the servant in ‘Oedipus’ she announced the death of her mistress by calling out her ‘dead, dead’ in a wholly unemotional and penetrating voice. Her ‘Jocasta has died’ without any sorrow but so firmly and definitely that the bare fact of her mistress’s death carried more weight at that precise moment than could have been generated by any grief of her own.*³⁴

The approach to intonation was therefore unemotional and detached, bringing the importance back to the plot rather than the psychological effect of the occurrence. This was mirrored by use of physicality in acting. Brecht comments that as part of the ‘total transformation of the character’ one has to “speak his part not as if he were improvising, but like a quotation”³⁵. Sometimes, to alienate further, Brecht would encourage the actors to “speak in their native dialect”³⁶ as their character. Similarly, physicality was also representative of human nature, but the actor had to be aware that it was but a ‘copy’³⁷.

In line with the Brechtian theory, In Scene 12 of *MCHC* intonation would be used greatly to portray the alienation effect in *Mother Courage*, specifically because of the dialectic nature of the scene: whereas the death of her daughter is a naturally emotional event, the actress would be encouraged to embrace the role with the ‘wholly unemotional’ voice, with lines like “Maybe she’s fallen asleep”³⁸. The practical element of native dialect would be effective in certain productions, for example in areas with a strong cultural bond to the war themes of the play, however it would greatly take away from the plot if all the actors were to speak in their native dialects, considering if the troupe is internationally founded. Also, the use of native dialect in this particular scene would not incorporate the previously discussed need to pronounce a character’s lines like a “quotation”, because the words would be altered and the meaning perhaps changed. In essence, the use of intonation in this scene, and the rest of the play, would mirror the geographical context and the cultural background of the actors.

²⁹ Styan, p159

³⁰ Brecht, *MCHC* p.110

³¹ *Ibid*, p160

³² *Ibid*, p161

³³ Benedetti, p188

³⁴ Brecht, p28

³⁵ *Ibid*, 138

³⁶ *Ibid*, 139

³⁷ *Ibid*, 138

³⁸ Brecht, *MCHC* p 110

On stage, the rehearsed social interactions become the *Gestus* – the embodiment of a relationship with oneself or with another character. Brecht said that the actor “must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing”³⁹. The use of physicality was key to Epic theatre, and also an element of realism. The physical gestures and use of body would portray the character’s role in society rather than their psychology, in order to create the alienation and lack of empathy that was mentioned before. The use of *gestus* was typical and representative of Epic theatre – it’s purpose was to alienate the audience from the character by showing a distinct emotion or ‘gesture’ that would identify their ‘social attitude’ and thus make their character’s objectives clear. It was used to portray heightened emotion, and to increase the level of ‘contradiction’ on stage. This was done through a “matter-of-fact” approach to movement and gesture, where the actor “does not wholly assume the character he is playing” and the action would be “performed as if it were an experiment, a demonstration or role-playing in general”⁴⁰. This technique is particularly important for Scene 12, as the final ‘social attitude’ of Mother Courage is portrayed clearly by the way she takes the cart for the last time to continue her pursuit of business during the war⁴¹. The English Touring Theatre *Mother Courage* Pack identifies the last *Gestus* as:

*The way that Mother Courage, all alone, hauls the cart round the stage for the last time, still looking for business, is a very particular gestus: a poor production of the play would make this image as pathetic as possible; Brecht’s by contrast, expressed a very troubling gestus, which showed a woman determined to continue living off the war, even though it had robbed her of everything.*⁴²

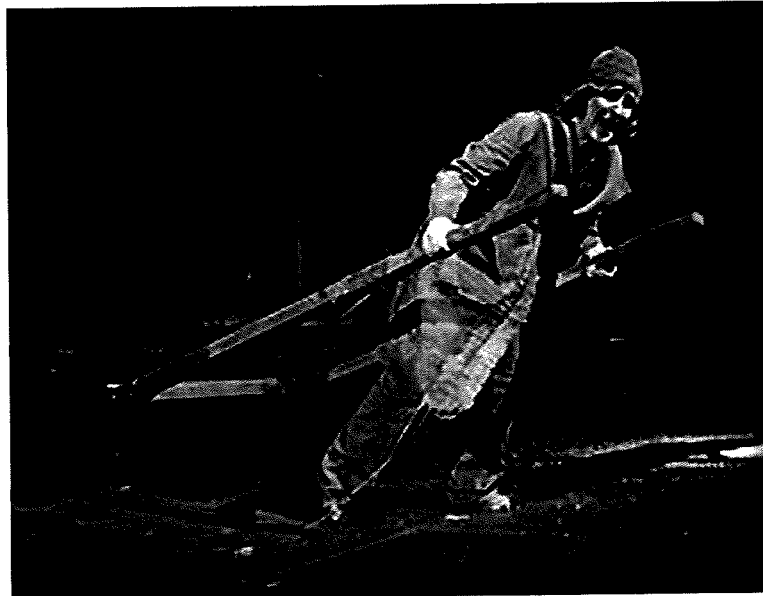


Fig 2. Fiona Shaw as Mother Courage. <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/arts/theatre/mother-courage-and-her-children-is-epic-theatre-7416774.html>.

Gestus is used throughout in *MCHC*, most famously in Scene 3 when Mother Courage has to refrain from expressing any emotion in identifying the body of her dead son Swiss Cheese. She

³⁹ *Ibid*, p136

⁴⁰ Styan, p151

⁴¹ Brecht, *MCHC* p.111

⁴² ETT, p14

addresses the audience with a silent scream, pictured below, and turns back to the action to “shake her head”⁴³ at his corpse. Observed through Brechtian application of Gestus, is the fact that Gestus can take a form of breaking the fourth wall – addressing the audience, or simply a physicality aimed at no one in particular – like the final wagon gest in Scene 12. Therefore, there is no need for the actor to break the fourth wall with that Gestus, because they are creating the alienation effect regardless – giving a social attitude summed up in a physical interpretation.



Fig 3. The ‘Silent Scream’. http://boston.com/community/blogs/rock_the_schoolhouse/2011/06/

The use of Gestus portrayed distance very effectively, and in practice Brecht commented on Weigel’s use of Gestus as one of his inspirations:

*As she descended the few steps, she took such huge paces that this slight figure seemed to be covering an immense distance from the scene of the tragedy to the people on the lower stage.*⁴⁴

The use of performance techniques in Epic theatre worked in conjunction with the theoretical approach underlined by Brecht to produce an actor that distances themselves from their character. This followed the didactic nature of Epic theatre and enabled the director to show a balanced, contradictory, argument to the audience, in hope that they would use theatre as a source of enlightenment in their own lives. Although Brecht had little concrete solutions to his theory in practice, unlike Stanislavski for example, many techniques of alienation during rehearsal and

⁴³ Brecht, MCHC page 64

⁴⁴ Brecht, p28

performance were established over the course of his interactions with theatre and were ultimately made concrete additions to his Epic style. The alienation effect of Scene 12 is paramount to the understanding of plot, and as it is the final scene of the play, the distancing of audience and actors is important for the final statement of the playwright about the real nature of Mother Courage, war and business⁴⁵. To this end, an actor playing Mother Courage would have to utilize a sequence of rehearsal techniques to separate their perception and that of their character, to eventually, through performance, demonstrate a scenario, a social interaction, rather than a psychological evaluation of their character.

⁴⁵ Brecht, MCHC p. 111

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Images

Fig 1. Meryl Streep as Mother Courage.

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Fig 3. The 'Silent Scream'. http://boston.com/community/blogs/rock_the_schoolhouse/2011/06/

Critique of Sources

Published Works

1. Books LLC. *Bertolt Brecht Theories and Techniques: Fabel, Epic Theatre, Distancing Effect, a Short Organum for the Theatre, Lehrstucke*. Books LLC, 2010.

I found this book in the library; however there seems to be no author. It is a small publication that provides a chapter (2 pages long usually) per each aspect of Epic theatre like the distancing effect, the not/but element, and the Street Scene model... I wasn't very sure about it's reliability because it said that it was a compilation of articles from the internet published in order to provide a broad overview of Brechtian theatre, and each chapter would provide a link to the internet source of the information. The fact that it had no author suggested that an element of bias, or perhaps misinformed statement, could be present – the information on the Internet can be altered by anyone.

Nevertheless, after cross-referencing with my other sources, it proved to be very useful as a small overview of the larger concepts. For example, I used it to begin my research into Gestus, as it provided me with a clear overview.

I proved its authenticity against my other sources, especially the first hand source of Brecht's essays, and continued to use it in my Research Investigation to begin ideas and support practical elements with theory. This book would be useful to those that are beginning to get acquainted with Epic theatre.

2. Brecht, Bertolt. Translated by John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. London: Methuen Drama, A&C Black Publishers Limited. 1964.

This book was my main source of primary information. The obvious advantage lays in the fact that, as a compilation of Brecht's essays and texts, it serves a first-hand nature for approaching Brechtian theatre. I used much of it to specify elements of the rehearsal process – like the aims of Brecht himself, and to illuminate the performance techniques – this book allowed for close examination of breaking the fourth wall and use of song, voice, and physicality like Gestus. One of the downfalls of approaching Brecht by reading Brecht is that one has to know when the text was written in order to understand whether or not his theories were concretely defined and not open to change. This is because some of Brecht's earlier theories did not test well in practice, and it was over the course of his work in theatre that he established his ideas, not vice versa. Therefore, I had to make sure that the essays I was reading were written during the later stages in Brecht's career because I wanted to analyze the Brechtian techniques that were concrete and could be used in modern day as well.

Overall, this book is a must have for anyone studying Epic theatre, because I believe direct contact with the practitioner's aims helped me understand the final outcome and practice of the style.

3. Benedetti, Jean. *The Art of the Actor*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

This book serves as a compilation of the acting styles of many theatre practices, divided into chapters by practitioner. The author says that it works as an attempt to 'retrace' the evolution of various acting styles. I utilized the Brecht chapter prominently when referring to the rehearsal stage rather than the performance, as I noticed that the author focuses on the build up of character through ideology rather than the final outcome. The rehearsal techniques weren't clearly defined, but generally stated – which hindered my ability to present a clear division between them. They tended to be linked together as a gradual process instead of separated, as done in my Research Investigation. Therefore, the book is more suited for those wanting to investigate into the theory behind Brecht's acting style rather than it's practice. What was useful was the amount of importance given to the relationship between Brechtian actors and Stanislavski's actors, drawing comparisons and conclusions that helped me understand the intricate differences between them.

4. Mumford, Meg. *Bertolt Brecht*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

This source was prevalent in my research on Epic Theatre. I had used the Routledge Performance Practitioners series before in my other Theatre work, and decided to investigate into this one, which is focused on Bertolt Brecht. It was definitely very reliable, using sources from Brecht himself, as well as cross-referenced interviews with Brechtian actors and Brechtian theorists, like Peter Brook. The main purpose and focus of the book is the life of Brecht, his theory, elements of his practice and a workshop idea at the end of the book. I found the practical elements described in this book the most extensive from across all the sources I've read so far, because Brecht himself tends to focus on theory rather than practice, and Mumford compiles all the existing, concrete knowledge of Gestus, set design and various other elements in clear, titled sections of his book.

From this book, I mostly used the ideas of dialectical theatre and Gestus, going into practical specifics and forming ideas about the difference in applications across different Epic plays.

Online Sources

1. Biggs, Anthony for "English Touring Theatre". *Mother Courage Resource Pack*. http://www.ett.org.uk/assets/file/172528_mother_courage.pdf. 2006. Accessed March 28th.

This source was made for an acting troupe that was performing *Mother Courage*, to inform them of the theory behind Epic theatre and the history and analysis of the play itself. I found it very useful because it was intended for actors and therefore explored in detail the use of Gestus, and even aspects of Epic theatre that I wasn't focusing on but had much to do with character – fragmented clothing, blocking, etc. I found the fact that it gave me a larger overview very helpful when structuring my ideas and understanding Brechtian alienation. I used it specifically for the rehearsal techniques and the detailed Gestus description, because unlike other sources it provided a lot of information on the specific warm up exercises and practical application of Brecht's theory into rehearsal. One downside is that the source is not all reliable; there is no date and no specific author, however there are many interviews with Brechtian actors, which were illuminating to read and to incorporate ideas from in my Research Investigation.

2. MIT web resources. *Epic Theatre using Verfremdungseffekt*. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/brecht.pdf>. 2004

This source was a PDF I found online that concerned itself with a brief overview of the different aspects of Epic Theatre – from costuming, to directing, lighting, set design and to my area of research – acting. I found it useful in the beginning of my Research Investigation, because although it did not provide in depth description of the elements of each aspect, and rather used short sentences like "addresses the audience" and "external acting", it was very useful in organizing the ideas that I wanted to cover in my investigation. The clarity with which it described the use of rehearsal techniques such as Spass and Fixing served as my foundation for understanding the performance techniques. Evidently, there was larger focus on rehearsal techniques rather than performance aspects, however I found it useful as a initiator of my choice of what to cover under the umbrella of 'performance'.

Holistically, the reliability of this PDF was lacking – the only source that it stated in the PDF, was that the information came from "miscellaneous WWW sources". I found this worrying in case it steered me in the wrong direction of research, however after cross-referencing with my published sources, it proved to be very comprehensive in its overview. I would recommend this source to anyone that is beginning to look at the simple, practical elements of Epic Theatre after reading about the theory, because the lists are exhaustive, alas not very detailed.

Online Articles

1. Kushner, Tony. *Mother Courage is not just an anti-war play*. The Guardian Online. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/sep/08/tony-kushner-mother-courage>. September 8, 2009.

This article was a review of a 2009 performance of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, written by a guardian.co.uk online journalist Tony Kushner. His focus was not on the practical elements but the thematic constitution of the play – questioning the view of Brecht himself on the war themes of the play. He questioned whether Brecht was agreeing with *Mother Courage* or disagreeing, through several examples in the text itself. It was an interesting article to read because it illuminated the purpose of Brecht in writing MHCH. It also reflected the purpose of Epic Theatre in portraying both sides of the argument, and the fact that the audience questions whether or not the author agrees with the character is telling of the success of Brecht in presenting a non-biased performances.

Images

All the images I used came from articles about current performances of *Mother Courage* (namely from 2006, 2009, 2003), like guardian.co.uk. This determined the reliability of the source – I used the guardian.co.uk website earlier in my Research Investigation, and found the information illuminating and vital to my understanding of Brecht. Therefore, I decided to use the articles further, researching into different performances to see what Gestus would look like and how expressive it would be as opposed to my preconceptions. I found very useful images of Gestus, like the Silent Scream one, which illuminated my research and understanding of the actual, visual practice of Gestus on stage. It would be interesting to see any Gestus videos performed by actual Brechtian actors, however there were none available on the Internet.