



**Bertolt Brecht 1898-1956**

**EPIC THEATRE**

using

**Verfremdungseffekt**

(AKA the V-effect, Making strange, Distancing, Alienation)

*“The actor is not Lear  
He shows Lear.”*

**Verfremdungseffekt:**

**through Fixing , Gest, Spass, and Multimedia**

Brecht was against naturalistic theatre where the audience “hang up their brains with their hats in the cloakroom.”

“The V-effect is to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident.

No attempt is made to put the stage (and the audience) in a trance.”

Everyday Examples of the V-Effect: “Witnesses of an accident demonstrating to newcomers how the victim behaved, a facetious person imitating a friend's walk” ..... Stage Example: “Chinese Theatre”

### **Aids to achieve this technique:**

“1. Transposition into the third person.

2. Transposition into the past.

3. Speaking the stage directions out loud.”

“Addressing the audience direct” as both actor and character.

Stage “purged from anything magical”

Use of half curtains

“Making visible the sources of light”

Using signs at the start of scenes

### **Fixing**

From the first rehearsals, the Cast forms opinions of the incidents or characters they are playing.

I.e. for what social purpose they are performing this particular historical event.

These opinions, once “fixed”, then determine the acting style for each character and event.

### **Gest**

“Gesture with attitude”.

To be able convey the intentions of the performance

Either by the whole picture, a single gesture or voice inflection

Example of Gest:

Gesture= “Soldiers marching across a stage.”

Gest= “Soldiers marching over wounded and dead across a stage”

## **Spass**

“Fun” / Satire...Grotesque Stereotypes.

The audience is being invited to laugh at these characters and ultimately condemn what they stand for.

(In rehearsal, to find a stereotype; explore the character from the outside-in.)

Two Acting Styles co-existing

Grotesque contrasted with Sympathetic down-to-earth characters

(both are making political statements to the audience and one shows up the other)

## **Multi-media**

Brecht believed in using Acting, Dance, Music, Song, Mask, Chorus, Signs & film Projection...

Not Combined, but Montaged in their own right.

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# **BRECHT'S EPIC THEATRE IN DETAIL**

ACTING, DESIGNING, PLAYWRIGHT, LIGHTING, DIRECTING, COMPOSING

## **Epic Acting**

Demonstrates rather than imitates

past tense,

stage directions

Gestures used to indicate inner feelings- stage pictures

preparation of characters on stage

address the audience

characters given titles- characters representative

external acting

physicality- gesture used to indicate inner feelings

ensemble

swap roles to evaluate characters

## **Epic Designer**

dispense with illusion and symbolism

no 'fourth wall'

minimal props

set change in view of audience

one prop per person- representative

using half curtains

## **Epic Playwright**

structured episodically

awareness of events in the past

tell audience through labels

use of cue cards to reinforce- fill in missing link

socialist message prevailed

use of parable

clear one sided message

'anti illusive techniques- flash back, missing time

## **Epic Lighting**

The lighting director in Epic theatre needs to abandon the idea of hiding sources of light to achieve a mysterious effect to draw the audience into the action.

Brecht flooded the stage with 'harsh white light',  
regardless of where the action was taking place and leaving the stage lamps  
in full view of the audience.

Obvious lighting constantly reminds the audience they are watching a play.

## **Epic Director**

An Epic director decides the blocking for the actor, which is done not for formal beauty.

Brecht wanted directors to block so it clarifies the structure of the human relationships in the play.

Brecht wanted to use everything on the stage to make the audience develop a more critical attitude.

## **Epic composer**

The composer in Epic theatre is very important as Brecht intentionally interrupts the action at 'key junctures', with songs to get the message across.

The composer should express his ideas of the plays themes independently  
and provide a separate comment on the action about themes and ideas.

Music helps distance the audience by not reinforcing the text but to provide  
a counterpoint to the action on the stage.

The words and tunes clash which draws attention to the words.

## **Aims**

(two essentials)...

**The message must be clear**

**The audience must remain critically aware**

# Brecht and Artaud

## *Brecht and Artaud basic facts and differences*

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### **BRECHT**

Brecht started influencing theatre after World War II. Emphasis on theatricality.

Spectator participates productively. Ask questions.

The social problem addressed should not be resolved in the theatre, but people should be inspired to go out and solve it.

#### **From The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre -**

Aristotelian theatre has reduced the spectator to passivity.

A feeling that nothing can be changed.

(Yesterday is presented in terms of today.)

Therefore, things have always been the same and are unchangeable. Brecht wanted to show the possibilities for change.

*Verfremdungseffekt* - has been translated as "alienation effect."

Marx said alienation is necessary before the desire for change can arise.

Brecht believed capitalism was the source of selfishness.

If he could 'alienate' the audience then they would approach the play intellectually, and be inspired to leave the theatre and change society.

Techniques of the alienation effect - to alienate the audience, keep them from becoming emotionally involved in the performance:

Very presentational, and therefore, actually very Greek.

Presentation is like using a chorus.

Signs explain each scene before it happens.

Characters presented in terms of social attributes, not basic psychology. Their psychology is determined by social attitudes.

If you remove the social system, the influence toward selfishness is removed.

Actors - present a character, don't become it.

Fragmentary scenery. Give them the minimum of what they need to see; (archetypal characters as stereotypes, but exaggerated and thus making it clear to the audience that the character is a representation).

### **Brechtian Techniques:**

Archetypes & stereotypes  
Gestus & V Effect (Adding meaning & Making Strange)  
Placards  
Luxury Balance  
Opposing Tension  
Focus on social classes  
Ensemble (actors on stage at all times)  
Montage (Putting scenes together)

Breaking down the fourth wall on stage

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### **ARTAUD**

Artaud worked primarily in France in the early part of the century (died in 1948).

Whereas Brecht thought problems were in society, Artaud thought they were in the subconscious. Thought values had become the property of the elite.

Not civilization, but syphilization (his term)  
We need a theatre that stirs up feelings by stirring up pain.  
Language is a tool of rationalization, we can deal with it.  
Theatre should not work through language, but something more elemental that gets down deep. Visual and aural explosions, surprises, violence.

Action should surround the audience. Large, open spaces.  
Overhead bridges. He liked to use space like factories and airplane hangars for his work, ritualistic costumes. Huge puppets, instruments, unidentifiable lighting - vibrating, shriveling effect, sound - staccato, shrill, like a factory.

We need myths, but new myths.  
"The theatre has been created to drain abscesses collectively"  
The only way to heal is through the Theatre of Cruelty. Forcing confrontation to face things buried in subconscious. Actors and audience should leave exhausted and transformed.  
Certain techniques have gotten into standard acting techniques  
body movement and vocal sounds

## Biography of Bertolt Brecht



Bertolt Brecht was born on February 10, 1898 in the medieval city of Augsburg, part of the Bavarian section of the German Empire. Married in 1897, his father was a Catholic and his mother a Protestant. Brecht was their first child and he was baptized as Eugen Bertolt Friedrich Brecht. His father, Bertolt Friedrich Brecht, worked as Chief Clerk in a paper factory and clearly fit the definition of “bourgeois.” His mother, Wilhelmine Friederike Sophie Brezing, was ill with breast cancer most of his young life. He had one brother, Walter, who was born in 1900. Throughout his life Brecht was supported by his family, especially his father with whom he disagreed strongly concerning the bourgeois lifestyle. His father continued to provide financial support and a home for much of his life. Only one correspondence between them survives: a letter where Brecht begs his father to raise his illegitimate children.

Brecht was a sickly child, with a congenital heart condition and a facial tic. As a result he was sent to a sanitarium to relax. At age six he attended a Protestant elementary school (Volksschule) and at age ten a private school: The Royal Bavarian Realgymnasium (Königlich-Bayerisches Realgymnasium). Like most students, he was educated in Latin and the humanities, and later exposed to thinkers such as Nietzsche. He suffered a heart attack at the age of twelve, but soon recovered and continued his education.

While in school he began writing, and ended up co-founding and co-editing a school magazine called “The Harvest”. By age sixteen he was writing for a local newspaper and had written his first play, *The Bible*, about a girl who must choose whether between living or dying and saving many others. He was later almost expelled at age eighteen for disagreeing on whether it was necessary to defend his country in time of war. By nineteen he had left school and started doing clerical work for the war, prevented from more active duty due to health problems.

In 1917 he resumed his education, this time attending Ludwig Maximilian Universitaet in Munich where he matriculated as a medical student. While there he attended Artur Kutscher’s seminars on the theater. He despised many of his fellow students and took every opportunity to return home. By this time his mother was heavily drugged with morphine as a result of her progressing cancer. He started to write *Baal* at this time, a play concerned with suffering caused by excessive sexual pleasures.

Brecht’s sex life is fascinating in many ways. He is thought to have had no less than three mistresses at any time throughout his adult life. As a child, the family’s second servant, Marie Miller, used to hide objects in her undergarments for Brecht and his brother to search for. Through Brecht’s poetry we are told that his mother used to smell his clothes to determine the extent of his sexual activities. By the age of sixteen he began to frequent a brothel as part of conscientious effort to broaden his experiences. Between ages sixteen and twenty he simultaneously pursued eight girls, including Paula Banholzer, the woman who gave birth to his illegitimate child in 1919. He is known to have experimented with homosexuality, often inviting literary and musically inclined males friends to his room on weekends in order for them to

read erotic compositions. His diaries, although vague, make mention of his need for both males and females to fulfill his sexual desires.

During World War I Brecht briefly worked as an orderly in an emergency hospital before being released from service after openly expressing his lack of conviction for the war. He soon found work as a theatre critic for a daily newspaper, "The People's Will," before moving on to become a dramaturg in Munich.

Paula Banholzer gave birth to his illegitimate child, Frank, when Brecht was only twenty-one. At the time Brecht was involved with another woman named Hedda Kuhn. His mother passed away soon thereafter in 1920. A year later he took his second trip to Berlin and attended the rehearsals of Max Reinhardt and other major directors. In 1922 his play *Drums in the Night* opened in Munich at the Kammerspiele and later at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin; he received the prestigious Kleist prize for young dramatists as result. Brecht also entered into his first committed relationship, his marriage with the opera singer Marianne Zoff at the age of twenty-four. Their daughter Hanne was born the following year. In spite of marriage, Brecht had extra-marital affairs and spent very little time with his wife or daughter. In 1923 his two plays *Jungle of Cities* and *Baal* were performed.

After moving to Berlin in 1924 he met a communist Viennese actress, Helen Weigel. His wife Marianne moved in with her parents after the birth of Hanne, and soon she stopped responding to Brecht's letters. At this time he began actively pursuing Helen Weigel. At age twenty-six Brecht fathered his second illegitimate child when Wiegel gave birth to their son, Stefan. Brecht also met Elisabeth Hauptmann with whom he began to collaborate. Two years later Brecht divorced Marianne Zoff and in 1929 he married Helen Wiegel at the age of thirty-one.

Helen Wiegel gave birth to their second child, Barbara, in 1930. During this time Brecht was by no means monogamous. He was obsessed with the idea of abandonment, and as a result he abhorred ending relationships. The women in his life were important for his writing career, and modern feminist detractors often try to claim that his mistresses in fact wrote much of what he takes credit for. Although not true, women such as Elisabeth Hauptmann did write significant parts of *The Three Penny Opera*. Other mistresses included Margarete Steffin, who helped him write *The Good Woman of Sezuan* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Hella Wuolijoki who allowed him to transform her comedy *The Sawdust Princess* into *Herr Puntila and His Man Matti*, and Ruth Berlau who bore a short-lived third illegitimate child in 1944. His wife Helen Wiegel was tolerant of his affairs and even warned other men to stay away from his mistresses on account of it upsetting him.

Brecht's writings show a profound influence from many diverse sources during this time and the remaining years of his life. He studied Chinese, Japanese, and Indian theatre, focused heavily on Shakespeare and other Elizabethans, and adopted elements of Greek tragedy. He found inspiration in other German playwrights, notably Büchner and Wedekind, and also enjoyed the Bavarian folk play. Brecht had a phenomenal ability to take elements from these seemingly incompatible sources, combine them, and convert them into his own works. His plays during this period include *St. Joan of the Slaughterhouse*, *The Exception and the Rule*, *The Good Woman of Sezuan*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Galileo*, *Herr Puntila and His Man Matti*, and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

In 1933 Brecht took his family and fled to Zurich after the burning of the Reichstag, later moving to Denmark. Brecht's German citizenship was revoked in 1935 by the Nazis while he was still there. In 1939 he moved to Stockholm as a result of growing Nazi pressure on Denmark, and in 1940 fled to Finland as a result of the advance of the Nazi troops. In 1941 he traveled via Moscow and Vladivostok to San

Pedro (the harbor of Los Angeles). He was able to collaborate on his writings with many other German exiles in Los Angeles, including Thomas Mann. In October of 1947, during the McCarthy years, Brecht was called to appear before the House Committee for Un-American Activities in order to investigate the "subversion" of Hollywood. Although not an official member of America's communist party, Brecht left the United States for Switzerland the next day. He soon reunited with Helen Wiegel and they travelled to East Berlin in 1948 and set up the Berliner Ensemble with full support from the communist regime. In 1950, Brecht and Wiegel were granted Austrian citizenship.

Brecht experimented with dada and expressionism in his early plays, but soon developed a unique style suited his own vision. He detested the "Aristotelian" drama and the manner in which it made the audience identify with the hero to the point of self-oblivion. The resulting feelings of terror and pity he felt led to an emotional catharsis that prevented the audience from thinking. Determined to destroy the theatrical illusion, Brecht was able to make his dreams realities when he took over the Berliner Ensemble.

The Berliner Ensemble came to represent what is today called "epic theater". Epic theater breaks with the Aristotelian concepts of a linear story line, a suspension of disbelief, and progressive character development. In their place, epic theater uses episodic plot structure, contains little cause and effect between scenes, and has cumulative character development. The goal is one of estrangement, or "Verfremdung", with an emphasis on reason and objectivity rather than emotion, or a type of critical detachment. This form of theater forces the audience to distance itself from the stage and contemplate on the action taking place. To accomplish this, Brecht focused on cruel action, harsh and realistic scenes, and a linear plot with no climax and denouement. By making each scene complete within itself Brecht sought to prevent illusion. A Brecht play is meant to provoke the audience into not only thinking about the play, but into reforming society by challenging common ideologies. Following in the footsteps of Pirandello, he blurs the distinction between life and theatre so that the audience is left with an ending that requires social action.

Brecht received the National Prize, first class, in 1951. In 1954 he won the international Lenin Peace Prize. Brecht died of a heart attack on August 14, 1956 while working on a response to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. He provided instructions that a stiletto be placed in his heart and that he be buried in a steel coffin so that his corpse would not be riddled with worms. He also left a will giving the proceeds of his various works to particular mistresses, including Elisabeth Hauptmann and Ruth Berlau. Unfortunately for them, the will lacked the necessary witness signatures and was therefore void. His widow, Helen Wiegel, generously gave small amounts of money to the specified women. Brecht is buried in the Dorotheenfriedhof in Berlin.

Thanks to:

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