7 ▶ Brecht's Heritage

The dramatic tradition in English is unthinkable without two authors. The first is of course Shakespeare, who stands out in the Anglo-American tradition of playwriting and has himself become a unique category within the literary canon of the whole Western world. Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon* sees Shakespeare as the "center of the canon" (see Bloom 43-71). It is hard to imagine an English-writing playwright disassociated completely from Shakespeare. The affiliation comprises various levels. There is the intimate knowledge of Shakespeare in the English speaking (and writing) culture, as well as the uncountable implicit presence of his plots and seminal characters in contemporary artifacts.[19]

The second is the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Although his universal influence on contemporary playwriting in English may be doubted, his influence in the field of our concern is unavoidable. The heritage of Brecht is directly connected with the main focus of this work, the messenger figure. His influence is present on at least two levels – those of topic and technique. These often find a union in Brecht's work and theoretical writings. Brecht, one of the most original and resourceful contributors to approach political issues in the theatre, remains an ever-present inspiration (and perhaps an obstacle, too) because his approach was so radically specific that it appropriates the arena of the contemporary political play. A majority of political plays thus enter a dialogue with Brecht's heritage. As was mentioned in the chapter on the mainstream Broadway/West End drama, Brecht is appreciated by and incorporated into the mainstream. Some of his most influential innovations, such as the ones described below, have become the new conventions of contemporary playwriting.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) made his distinctive mark in the history of drama and theatre as a playwright and author of several modern classics which have, too, entered

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19) For example, the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard is based on a story of the two eponymous characters from *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. In this play, the two characters often report on the concurrent events that are taking place outside the stage, in fact referring to the parallel story of *Hamlet*. This expects a preliminary knowledge of *Hamlet* by the audience. The mechanism is analysed in the case study dealing with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in a case study below in this book.

the Western canon as proposed by Bloom (namely his plays *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948) to mention just the notorious ones). Furthermore, his influence on later theatre practitioners lay in the fact that he also produced several theoretical writings about his aesthetic concepts, which he put into practise during his career.

Following contemporaneous theoretical findings and theatrical practices which he adopted, developed and re-worked, he became best known as a proponent of a new theatrical style which he developed together mainly with Erwin Piscator and others, and which he labelled "Epic Theatre". The discoveries of his time found their way easily to his theatrical practice, because "science and knowledge [were] not grim and dreary duties but first and foremost sources of pleasure" (Jameson 2), that is to say, belonging naturally to the aesthetic realm. Armed thus with new knowledge and residing in the socially troubled environment of the Weimar Republic, he gradually began to make his way towards the unification of the theatrical and the political.

There are several levels within the movement, that is, the ideological approach, the content and the form. The most general ideological level, which Jameson calls the *doctrine* (referring thus to Brecht's *Lehre*), may be seen generally as Marxism as there is a constant tendency to depict the suppressed masses in class struggles within the historical tumult of the bourgeois society, but still "[if] it is simply 'Marxism', and even if the question of tendency is resolved [...], the works seem to stage a good deal more than that" (Jameson 35). The problem with Brecht's ideology is that while it may be, with a certain level of certainty, deduced from what his *doctrine* was founded on (from both his plays and theoretical writings), it is difficult and near impossible to summarise the outcome. "Brecht has generally been characterized as the champion of an intellectualistic theatre" (36). Theatrical entertainment, understood as an aesthetic pastime activity, is the main feature of the "theatre" as the traditional genre which needs further development. Brecht defines the old aim of the theatre in these terms in §1 of his "A Short Organum": "'Theatre' consists in this: in making live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings and doing so with a view to entertainment" (180). If the idea is not to entertain but to present something else on the stage, the emphasis of the work shifts. The aesthetic converges with the political here.

Brecht's idea was to portray current society on the stage, which should "tell a story" of societal types (the worker, the barricade fighter, the strike-breaker) and teach the audience about the world they live in. In order to do so, he saw it necessary to transform the theatre as he knew it: "It is understood that the *radical transformation of the theatre* can't be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time" (Brecht, "The Epic Theatre" 23). Social conditions and social transformations go hand in hand with the transformation of the theatre and they present new sorts of demand on the theatre. Brecht attributed an important role to the Epic Theatre. In his view, it was not only supposed to reflect the society, for example, as a document, but it was also supposed to change it – and,

supposedly, make it better: "...it is precisely theatre, art and literature which have to form the 'ideological superstructure' for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age's way of life" (23), writes Brecht. So, the society of the Weimar Republic has a direct impact on the creation of Epic Theatre but, at the same time, there is an ambition that Epic Theatre would influence it in return. Bringing the world of theatre into the political political sphere means participating in actual politics.

The portrayal of a contemporary society has aesthetic aims as well as political ones, such as an educative impact on the audience: "The stage has to be instructive. Oil, inflation, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation" (Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure" 71). In these topics, the ideological meets the topical. If Brecht wanted to be instructive, to teach his *doctrine*, he had to distance himself from the tradition of the theatre as had been done in days gone by: "...the theatre, while encouraging the production of new plays, gave absolutely no practical guide. Thus in the end the new plays only served the old theatre and helped to postpone the collapse on which their own future depended" ("Shouldn't we Abolish Aesthetics?" 21). Brecht saw the new role of the theatre in its political involvement. In order to break free from the old norms, he started to deal explicitly with social and political issues. From this perspective, one may view Brecht as "the German 'documentary' dramatist" (Brockett 642). The inspiration surrounded Brecht, and Jameson identifies its sources in the shattered material and social conditions of the Weimar Republic:

> The first genuine historical level, then, is clearly enough Weimar itself and the tropes of cynicism: the emergence of the great demonstrandum of the Brechtian paradox and sarcastic reversal; of the cynicism, not of the writer, but of reality itself: the rawest, desecularized version of capitalism, without any of its French, English or Italian cultural veneer, beginning from the zero point of the war's end and the collapse of the state and of authority. (9)

The country was on its knees and it deserved an impulse for getting better. Brecht's "ambitions are cast as widely as Aristotle's, which seek the Good in its most august classical city-state form" (20). New Epic Theatre is bound to deal with pressing contemporary social issues even at the risk of their not being universally understood. That is, that they will neither meet the "aesthetic norm" of the current artistic discourse (in Mukařovský's sense of the norm) nor the universality of a topic: "The works now being written are coming more and more to lead towards that great epic theatre which corresponds to the sociological situation; neither their content nor their form can be understood except by the minority that understands this. They are not going to satisfy the old aesthetics; they are going to destroy it" (Brecht, "Shouldn't we Abolish Aesthetics?" 21-2).

This is not to say that it is exclusively Brecht who lets the social environment crucially influence his plays and then represent the social on the stage, thus inciting or entering a dialogue in the public domain – it is understood that theatre as a social institution cannot be done in any other way and that it always, necessarily and inescapably, does reflect "the sociological situation". Yet Brecht's take on this fact was so ferocious that it

radically changed the understanding of possibilities of depicting the social/political on the stage, from his days onwards.

It is now, that Brecht's theatrical technique comes into question. The technique of Epic Theatre is what made Brecht famous and what connected him, as the most prominent proponent of the *epic* style, with what we understand now as political theatre and drama. Thus it is impossible to avoid Brecht when dealing with political theatre and drama on the topical level and when dealing with the messenger figure and its characteristics and role.

The *epic* style and its characteristics are the main focus of the following paragraphs in which we will succinctly summarise its most important features, and thus illustrate why Brecht's concept is so crucial and influential for the future development of any Western drama which gives reports about the actual world and which tackles political issues. As has become clear from his comments about the state of drama and theatre in his time, Brecht decided in favour of a new approach in the ideological (*doctrinal*) and topical (*documentary*) dimension of Epic Theatre. In order to be able to meet his aims, he also needed to adopt several technical devices of dramatization, direction and staging. Among them were the use of certain literary, theatrical and technological elements.

As far as the literary element of Epic Theatre is concerned, it may be considered a step in the direction of non-theatricality, as "literary" in the epic sense belongs to the area of storytelling rather than drama or theatre. In classical drama, the literary (storytelling) element is often played out by the chorus. Brecht adopted this chorus, but "modernized" it – he often included songs into his plays which meant the singers then had a similar role in the epic performance as the chorus used to in classical drama. Brecht's use of song is also specific for the following reason: "A modern equivalent of the chorus is the song, of the type propagated both in theory and in practice in the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. In contrast to the traditional type of song in drama, Brecht's 'songs' do not remain entirely within the internal system of communication, but break or transcend it by addressing the audience directly" (Pfister 79-80).

Merging storytelling and drama turns out to be highly productive when done with a sense of purpose and measure. Indeed, Brecht, who took performance as an experiment, reflected upon the use of literary elements in theatrical performances and strove for such a balance that would support rather than diminish the theatrical potential of his performances. He was aware of the specifics of theatre in comparison to the mere dramatisation of primarily literary texts, as he claimed that "[t]he theatre apparatus's priority is a priority of means of production" (Brecht, "Literarization" 43). What he had to do, then, was to incorporate the literary into the theatrical.

On one level, which is seen as the most primitive, the literarization of the theatre happens through a presence of short messages in the written form on the stage. These can be banners, posters and flyers, but most typically, and in accordance with Brecht's use of modern technology, they are projected on to a screen in the form of titles. Silent films, which are undergoing a tumultuous development and are extremely popular at the time,

are the obvious inspiration.[20] But Brecht sees this in his essay "The Literarization of the Theatre". "[T]itles and screens" on the stage are "a primitive attempt at literarizing the theatre" (43). There are other means of literarization, which are of a more profound nature.

One such means, is the merging of the literary with the dramatic in the characters' speeches. "Literarizing entails punctuating 'representation' with 'formulation'; it gives the theatre the possibility of making contact with other institutions for intellectual activities" (43-4). When a character "formulates" his or her opinion or utters a commentary, he or she extracts him– or herself from the realm of the classical theatrical representation. As the quote from Brecht himself suggests, it is a way in which his theatre can enter the domain of public debate.

One of the possibilities of "formulating" is to use the technique of reportage on the stage. In the case of Epic Theatre, the use of reportage has a specific aim. Brecht's reportage serves as a "formulation" of opinion about the world of the play, which has the intention of changing or channelling the audience's opinions about their actual (historical) world. This is one of the reasons why Brecht's use of reportage has been so influential. However, it is a very specific use of the technique, which is closely connected to Brecht's view of the theatre as the experimental arena for a formulation of opinions about the situation in the society, for the purpose of bringing about a change in the society. This is then one of the ways in which Brecht uses reportage.

Furthermore, in Epic Theatre, reportage is also employed as a specific acting technique. An actor is supposed to be able to distance himself or herself from the character he or she plays and act as if "reporting" about his or her own character. In the development of this technique, Brecht followed Stanislavsky's concept of "identification" (or, in Brecht's words, "total transformation") and added another dimension to it, that of a back reflection of the identity of a character. "[T]he actor speaks his part not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation" ("Short Description" 138). Thus he or she reports about his or her character. In semiotic terms, it is possible to distinguish between these two levels as different sign-systems: "Brechtian Epic Theatre made great play with the duality of the actor's role as stage sign-vehicle *par excellence*, bound in a symbolic relationship which renders him 'transparent', at the same time that it stresses his physical and social presence" (Elam 8). It is worth noting that such an approach consciously attempts to break Zich's triad of the actor himself, stage figure, and dramatic character. This disruption of the triad has become known and the alienation effect, or the *V-effekt*.

Lastly, before we turn to the *V-effekt* in greater detail, reportage has also been employed as a technique by Brecht in the broader sense, which is our primary focus – as a way of introducing information from outside the stage frame of the fictional world of the play or from the actual world.

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20) This is somewhat paradoxical, perhaps, as film lacked recorded speech due to technical inadequacies and used titles to make up for this fact. On the other hand, theatre naturally disposed of sound and the use of titles is thus illogical. Yet, Brecht was presumably aware of the difference between the impact of the spoken word (temporal and aural sign) and the written (permanent and visual sign). The further development of this idea is unfortunately beyond the scope of this work.

The alienation effect is a concept that Brecht adopted from Shklovsky, whose term *ostranenije* is sometimes translated as "defamiliarization" or "estrangement" (Pavis, *Dictionary* 18). In short, what Shklovsky sees as the most important feature of the *priem ostranenija* (the alienation-effect device) is that it functions as a signal to the reader[21] that what he reads does not stand for itself as a well-known, familiar, object, but as something which calls for attention and needs to be focused on and further understood. Such devices thus carry the potential for the texts to be self-aware of their artistic qualities and consciously create an aesthetic perception of the given text. Brecht applied this concept on his own version of this effect, which was to function in the theatre. He transposed it from the level of text to all levels of theatrical performance (Musilová 26): characters and their actions, events, sets and plots, to name just a few. He also introduced the German expression *Verfremdungseffekt*, now an international term, which is often abbreviated as *V-effekt* and, subsequently into English as the *A-effect*.

The A-effect is one of the key techniques and devices in Brecht's theatre. It meets Shklovsky's view in the sense that it functions as a marker for the audience that what they see is not to be taken for granted as generally understood, but that it yet needs to be discovered and learnt. In accordance with Shklovsky, Brecht posits that the "aim of this technique, known as the alienation effect, was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident" (Brecht, "Short Description" 136). For example, when an actor introduces himself or herself with his or her actual name on the stage, the dichotomy of the dramatic character (as the mental concept in the viewer's head), the stage figure (the concrete realization of this concept in a given time and space) and the actor, is clearly signalled: "The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying" (137). The audience is thus aware of watching an illusion and that the performance is also aware of this fact. One of the main constituents of the dramatic illusion (or, in the case of *mimesis,* operating as a convention), "the idea of total transformation is abandoned" (Brecht 138)[22].

When the "fourth wall" is shattered[23], it is possible to realize that the performance is taking place in a given social context and that it reflects this context – it can, indeed, communicate with the actual world outside the walls of the theatre building efficiently and thus meet one of Brecht's aims, pointed out above. It is the key concept for Epic

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21) Shklovsky dealt with the *ostranenije* and its function in the aesthetics of literary texts (fiction).

22) It is perhaps worth mentioning here, that Brecht was a genius in terms of transforming theories of others according to his own needs and projects. Among other things, he was strongly affected by developments in Russia (the Russian Soviet theatre – theatre of agitation – and theory – Russian Formalism) and he made use of them. Brecht's take on Shklovsky's *ostanenije* is described below; here it is necessary to remind the reader that he was also influenced by Stanislavsky's acting technique: while Stanislavsky (in the earlier and the most influential period) proposed the total empathy of the actor with his or her character, Brecht took this concept and made one more step. An intimate knowledge of a character enables the actor to distance himself or herself from the character or, in other words, play this character in a way that produces the A-effect.

23) Brecht finds it crucial to tear down the fourth wall: "It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience" (Brecht, "Short Description" 136).

Theatre, which could only then be instructive and activist: "*V-effekt* is the key term of Brecht's reform of the theatre. It is an epic-producing technique (such that makes an epic representation possible). Estrangement from a represented event can be created on levels of all constituents of a theatre performance" (Musilová 26). The audience is constantly reminded that they are not being entertained but taught to[24]. This means that Shklovsky's *ostranenije* gains a new dimension as Shklovsky's and Brecht's expectations of the device differed: "While Shklovsky's *ostranenije* was a purely aesthetic concept, concerned with renewal of perception, Brecht's *Verfremdung* had a social aim [...] Brecht wished to strike not merely at the perceptions, but at the consciousness of his spectators" (Mitchell 74). The audience of the alienated Epic Theatre does not watch a drama (play) in the "old" sense of entertainment (as Brecht saw it, see the quote above) or that which leads to any form of aesthetic pleasure. It is necessary to sympathize with characters but also be made aware of the emotional involvement. A full identification is not the aim because "the technique which produces an A-effect is the exact opposite of that which aims at empathy. The actor applying it is bound not to try to bring about the empathy operation" (Brecht, "Short Description" 136). Epic Theatre is social theatre, not an intimate personal one.

Besides reporting on a character by an actor-on-stage which has been mentioned above, there are several other techniques that lead to the A-effect. Brecht describes them, among others, in his essay "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect" and in "A Short Organum for the Theatre". The latter work identifies various levels on which the A-effect may be established. As Brecht and his techniques are not the primary interest of this book, a succinct summary of the most important features for such acting as presented by Pavis (quoting from "A Short Organum") in his *Dictionary* will be sufficient:

1. The *fabula* tells two stories: one is concrete and the other is an abstract and metaphorical parable of it.
2. The *scenery* presents the object to be recognized [...] and the criticism to be made [...].
3. *Gestures* provide information about the individual and his social status [...].
4. The *diction* does not "psychologize" the text by trivializing it, but restores rhythm and artificial construction [...].
5. Through his *acting*, the actor shows the character he plays, rather than incarnating him.
6. *Addresses to the audience* [...] also [...] break the illusion. (Pavis, *Dictionary* 19)

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24) Some sources (Brockett, Musilová, Pavis) identify Brecht as a follower of the Soviet "activist" theatre of the post-1917 revolution era, while Jameson focuses more on the contemporaneous situation in the Weimar Republic and the Marxist world-view as present in what he calls Brecht's *doctrine,* as emphasized above. I rather subscribe to Jameson's view as it is not my aim to cover the various development stages of Epic Theatre here, but rather to focus on some of the most important features that mark Brecht as one of the greatest influences on the twentieth-century dramatists dealing with social issues, politics and also borrowing from Brecht's arsenal of theatrical devices.

From these rules, or guidelines, we can see that the form which Brecht's performances take as a result, is very specific. The A-effect is an instrument which, among other things, helps to establish communication between the theatre and its audience, because it offers the audience a different type of theatre to that which they were accustomed, and therefore destroys the idea of theatre as entertainment, which can be forgotten once the curtain comes down (or kept as a pleasurable memory). The logic which lies behind such an approach was implicitly present in the opening paragraphs of this sub-chapter: the aim of Epic Theatre is not merely to entertain, but to change the society. In order to do so, it must be different from older theatrical forms. By picturing the political differently, a specific type of communication with the audience is established and the political message is adopted by the audience, who can subsequently "change the world".

Neither Frayn, nor Stoppard, nor Wilson have this kind of ambition with their dramas. Their communication with their audiences is different from Brecht's, although they are well aware of all the techniques that he used before them, and they are his followers in the sense that they often report on the social and the political. But they do not shatter the fourth wall and they do not expect to redefine the mental maps of their audiences' social or political realities. If their plays come close to this, then it is as the aesthetic artefacts rejected by Brecht. That is, pleasurable memories of artistic experiences at the theatre, which become a piece in the broader debate about society and politics, in which drama and theatre participate to a lesser or greater degree.