

Brecht's Search for New Theatre

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Abstract:

The paper explores how Brecht, the German poet-playwright employed different terms to introduce the concept of his envisioned theatre and then expressed his dissatisfaction with these terms while thinking they were unable to capture the complete sense of what he thinks about his type of theatre. The study focuses on the fluidity of Brechtian theatre as well as tries to discover the intents behind these changes that make Brecht an elusive writer and complex phenomenon. It investigates the evolution of a new but fluid theatre and how his new type of theatre offers a rich variety of entertainment and instruction to the audience.

Key Words:

Fluidity, non-Aristotelian theatre, epic theatre, dialectics, Marxism

Introduction:

Bertolt Brecht uses theatre as a political institution to bring about social change. His “non-Aristotelian theatre” (Brooker, 1994, p.188) raises political and social issues e.g. inflation, war, oil, social struggle, the family, religion, wheat market” and asks audience to look for solution that will ultimately lead to change. He defines his concept of theatre by using different terms which he kept on revising with the passage of time. First, he used and promoted the term “epic theatre” (ibid) to describe his concept of a new theatre. But after a few years, Brecht realized the limitations of the epic theater and introduced such terms as “dialectical theatre or theatre of contradictions”, “pedagogic or scientific theatre” and “philosophical folk theatre” (ibid). His dissatisfaction with the different terms is evident from his own views when he argues that the term epic theatre is “too slight and too vague for the kind of theatre intended; it needs an exacter definition and must achieve more’ (Brecht, 1964, p.276). Brecht kept on looking for ever new terms due to the fact that the existing theatre was unable to represent the complex surrounding social realities. He thought that his envisioned theatre should attempt to capture the totality of the social reality. Hence, he continued employing and refashioning his concept of theatre. As He (2018) argues “Brecht believes that art should follow reality and continue searching for, exploring, and creating new techniques, methods, and forms to make a full account of the ever-changing social reality” (p.56).

Taking it into account, the researcher thinks that terms like these are limited in their scope and fail to embody the concept of Brecht's envisioned theatre since they are not exact and fail to achieve more. Peter Brooker (2006) rightly observes that “The most damaging yet most common error in discussions of Brecht's theory has been to see it as fixed and unchanging” (p.209). In his theory of theatre, nothing seems categorical or determined. Therefore, the researcher considers that the term fluid theatre may be appropriate one to understand his concept of evolutionary theatre that is not static or fixed one. Rather, it is a sort of theatre that is open to change and hence a fluid theatre.

Statement of the Problem:

The present study shows that the terms used by Brecht are inadequate to encompass his vision of theatre. The researcher's investigation of his plays and his theory of drama shows that fluid theatre will be an appropriate term to describe the comprehensiveness and totality of Brechtian theatre.

Research Methodology:

The researcher will use qualitative paradigm for this research. For this purpose, he will draw on Brecht's plays, his interviews, critical analysis of his plays and different scholars' works as data.

Background and Context/ Literature View:

First of all, the researcher would like to briefly describe the aforementioned terms that Brecht used for his concept of theatre and trace shifting attitude in his theory of drama. In 1930, Brecht (1998) in his notes on *The Rise and Fall of The City of Mahogany* declared that "The modern theatre is the epic theater" (p.37). It is "an avant-garde" (Basuki, 2002, p.137). While elaborating his concept of epic theatre, Brecht (1995) argues that epic drama is "a play that is as free, flexible and episodic as narrative" (p.307). It is "anti-illusory and anti-hypnotic theatre" (Hochman, 1984, p.392). He further explains that it is "a theatre for Learning" (Brecht, 1995, p.307) and narrates rather than represents. Contrary to the traditional and bourgeois theatre that appeals to the spectators' emotions, it appeals to their reason, rouses their critical faculties and prompts to take a decisive action. Thus, Brecht's theatre challenges and questions the ideology of the traditional theatre. Soon after the introduction of the term epic theatre, Carl Weber (2006) comments that Brecht realized the limitation of his envisioned theatre and argued "It is only as much epic theatre as can be accepted (and offered) today . . . But when will there be the true, radical epic theatre" (p.177)?

Thus, after a few years, Brecht realized the inadequacy and insufficiency of the term epic theatre and introduced a new term i.e. "dialectical theatre" (ibid) or theatre of contradictions. Peter Brooker (2006) rightly observes that through the epic theatre, Brecht "came to think of it as too limited and as open to distortion. The concept was too slight and too vague for the kind of the theatre intended" (p.214). Brecht (1964) further elaborates that "an effort is now being made to move from the epic theatre to the dialectical theatre, epic theatre is too formal a term for the kind of theatre that aimed at" (pp.281-82).

Brecht's shift from epic to a dialectical theatre is the result of his increasing consciousness of the complexities and contradictions of human behavior on the one hand and the way social being changes and influences the individual and vice versa on the other hand. Thus, "there is a constant dialect, a process of reciprocal influence and change" (Rorrison, 1986, p. xxxiv). The term epic theatre does not address and highlight the dialectical relationship between man and society as Brecht wanted. Therefore, he replaced it with dialectical theatre since it did not fulfill its social function though it entertains. As C. Bartram (1982) says "To this he [Brecht] opposed his Marxist concept of a dialectical theatre that would present man and society as understandable and alterable" (p.99). However, Brecht's dialectical theatre is not a complete rejection of the epic theatre. Rather, it "subsumes the features of the epic; Brecht regarded the earlier term as too limiting fully to define as his envisioned new theatre" (Weber, 2006, P.170). Brecht's application of dialectical theatre is very much visible in "his dialectic learning plays *Lehrstucks*" (Subiotto,

1982, p. 203). These plays are “experimental in articulating social and political issues in a simple, lucid but schematic form for the benefit of the performers, not for an audience. The participation of the actors in enacting and discussing a situation was a form of political self-instruction...” (ibid).

By introducing the term of dialectical theatre, Brecht broadened the scope of his theatre. Prior to it, his theatre was limited in subject-matter and function. Now, its aim was to further the change and progress of both an individual and society. Later on, Brecht used the term pedagogic or scientific theatre by which he meant “a clinical, dispassionate mode of analysis” (Brooker, 2006, p. 188). The term also refers to the precise, graphic and “scientifically exact representation of human society in theatre” (Subiotto, 1982, p.204). It is due to the use of this term that the charge is levelled against his theatre of being rational “cold, severe and dryly didactic” (Weber, 2006, p. 172). Like other terms, Brecht realized that that this term was also limited in its scope and consequently dropped it. As Subiotto (1982) comments “... he [Brecht] felt that this, too, was not broad enough and perhaps already ‘verschmutzt’ (contaminated) by the problem of social and moral responsibility of science” (p.204). In the later years, Brecht introduced the term philosophical folk theatre to emphasize “the artistic and political function” (Brooker, 2006, p.188) of the theatre.

These different terms were used and dropped by Brecht himself for his new concept of theatre. Some critics have also suggested different names for Brecht’s theatre according to their own observation and perception. Among them, the well-known American critic, Eric Bentley (1965) opines that “Epic theatre is not the correct term that should be used to describe Brecht’s theatre” (p.37). To him, Brecht’s theatre may be described as a lyric theatre because poetry is the prominent feature of Brecht’s theatre (Bentley, 1963, p.37). He further continues that the term epic theatre is rigid and misapplication to Brecht’s plays since it fails to capture the complexity and versatility of the playwright’s art. Similarly, some other critics like Marvin Carlson (1989), Elizabeth Wright (2016), H.T. Lehmann and K. Munby (2006) consider that Brecht’s theatre possesses the characteristics of postmodernism. Hence, he is the herald of postmodern theatre. Their views further highlight the fact that all the above-mentioned terms do not recognize the multidimensionality and complexity of Brecht’s envisioned theatre.

Later, it has been observed that Brecht’s own terms about his concept of theatre are also not broad and enough in their scope. They address either one or the other aspect of his theatre and fail to grasp the full potentiality and totality of his theatre. Brecht’s theatre is iconoclastic as well as a theatre which is open to further changes and developments. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that there is something categorical and formulaic about Brecht’s theory of theatre.

Brecht’s theatre can be best described as a fluid theatre due to some cogent and convincing reasons. Like the terminology, there is a shifting tendency in his views and notions about drama. In his early work, Brecht seems to insist on rationality, didacticism and detachment (A.E.). Yet in the later years, he changed his views and declared that “Reason and emotion can’t be divided” (Brecht, 1964, p.162). Similarly, he also changed his views about the didactic function of the theatre and argued that learning through entertainment would be most effective. Stanley Hochman (1984) observes the fact that “Brecht’s early insistence on a strictly anti-illusory and anti-hypnotic theatre mellowed with time, and in the late 1940s he also accepted, though with wry comment, emotional involvement and entertainment as functions of the theatre” (p.392).

For Brecht, theatre is “an intellectual process” (Boal in Birringer, 1991, p. 14). According to Brecht’s new vision of theatre, spectators should get awareness from his plays. They should reflect “critically on the social causes of human suffering” (Curran 2001, 167). Drama should rouse the critical and analytical abilities of the audience so that they may understand the social issues in a better perspective and move towards the solution of those issues. For this purpose, Brecht disrupts the fourth wall in his plays so that the audience may reflect on the issues from a detached and alienated perspective. Because to involve means to be emotionally attracted by the play and lose the awareness and understanding that is at the heart of epic theatre. Unlike his contemporary Marxist writers who believe that “an artwork should induce a transformational experience in the beholder, Brecht wants the spectator to be alienated from the actors so as to become intellectually

engaged with the narrative” (Zazzali, 2013, p.692). In this way, Brecht’s views on theatre prompted a great shift from the traditional Aristotelian theatre. Christopher Baugh (2006) observes that “Brecht’s refunctioning of stage practice signifies a major shift in theatrical philosophy – from an essentially romantic aesthetic founded upon the principle of the ‘absorption’ of the spectator in the product of art towards a theatre of rhetorical gesture and process” (p.274). It is also in this context that Brecht argues that the audience should smoke and drink because smoking and drinking will enhance their critical abilities that is the desired end of drama. While watching the play, the audience’s mental alertness will enable them to critically evaluate reality and get better insight of the surrounding phenomenon. To achieve this alienated and detached impression of the play, Brecht changed the concept of actor. In his plays, the actors appear on the stage as objective and impersonal characters who present social issues in terms of third person reporter since they know that there is no fourth wall, they are being observed by the audience. This change in the concept of actor further helped Brecht to involve the audience in the intellectual process and become the well informed and responsible citizen of the society. Thus, Brechtian theatre is political in nature and aims at social change. Along with the character and audience, it is pertinent to mention another important Brechtian term *gestus*. Brecht (1964) defines *gest(us)* as “not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes” (p.104). *Gestus* on an anti-realistic stage also helps enhance audience’s awareness about social issues and understand their responsibility. As Elisabetta Vinci (2019) argues that “Finally, his theatre is epic because it aims to produce knowledge through the critical narration of facts and, as a result, to provoke a sociopolitical transformation of reality” (p.162). It is this stance that distinguishes Brecht’s theatre from Anti-Aristotelian theatre and modern “culinary theatre” (ibid).

This flux and fluidity are also explicit in the text and performance of the plays which are open ended and according to Brechtian definition of theatre can be changed after the audience’s reactions and responses. To Brecht, the text of the play is never a finished object. Rather it is a “raw material to be changed around and shaped according to actors’ experience” (Innes& Shevtsova, 2013, p.144). Similarly, the performance of the play is also open ended. As Terry Eagleton (2013) comments that “In so far as the audience is made to pass judgments on the performance and the actions it embodies, it becomes an expert collaborator in an open-ended practice, rather than the consumer of a finished object. The text of the play itself is always provisional: Brecht would rewrite it on the basis of audience’s reactions and encouraged others to participate in that rewriting” (p.61). Eagleton further says that “The play is thus an experiment, testing its own presuppositions by feedback from the effects of performance; it is incomplete itself, completed only in the audience’s reception of it” (ibid, p.62). In addition to it,

Brecht also modified the concept of a single author as producer of a work. To him, the people living together can put their thoughts together to create and produce a play. They are co-participants and co-authors. This concept gave Brecht a freedom to change the mode of creation and production and introduce the concept of play as a collaborative and combined effort instead of a single author's proprietorship. As Vipin Kumar and et al (2021) argue that "The objective of this revolution in the idea of creation, denouncing the concept of the author as the only genius, was to change aesthetic production completely, similarly to the workers 'councils which attempted to transform industrial and political establishments" (p.72). Brecht's intentions behind all these iconoclastic changes were to produce a drama where the informed audience can become the agent of change, a sort of educators, who may disseminate the message of change in the society. In this regard, Brecht resembles Shelley who uses west wind to propagate his message of change in the society.

To convey this fluid text on the stage, Brecht uses a fluid style which is combination of expressionism, dadaism, surrealism, futurism, the music hall which mostly derives from the modern avant-garde school of art and literature. For him, no single form of or mode of representation can capture the contemporary reality with all its complexities. Therefore, he uses a mode of representation to the extent that suites his purpose and in this way creates something different in the theatrical style. Raman Selden and et al (2005) say that "Brecht believed that no model of good form could remain in force indefinitely; there are no eternal aesthetic laws. To capture the living force of reality the writer may be willing to make use of every conceivable form old and new" (p.91). The existing theatre was unable to portray the contemporary reality with all its social, political and economic factors. Neither socialist realism nor critical realism was able to portray this complex reality. It demanded a new approach, a new style that could reflect it convincingly to the audience. Brecht himself points out this fact: "Methods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. Reality alters; to represent it, the means of representation must alter too" (ibid).

This "literary eclecticism" (Hochman, 1984, p. 393) and fluidity are also visible in the borrowing of different devices and techniques which Brecht employs to create a unique type of theatre. For this purpose, he draws upon the medieval morality plays, the reformation and Jesuit theatre of 16th and 17th centuries, the Oriental theatre, the Japanese Noh plays, the Austrian and Bavarian folk comedy along with the techniques of the German theatre. This theatrical knowledge and experience of varied types helped Brecht revolutionize the theatrical practice and create a new type of theatre.

Similarly, Brecht attacks the classical notion of "a fixed character" (Brooker,2006, p.220). He rejects this notion that human nature is fixed and unchangeable. Like Jacques Lacan, he believes that identity is not something fixed and stable. Rather, it is a process that never comes to end or completion. It is incoherent and subject to change. And it is in this perspective that Brecht considers his audience and characters of having fluid identities. Talking about this fact of Brecht's characters, Peter Brooker (2006) mentions "Rather than bringing a fixed character into views, or losing themselves in a role, and an epic actor showed his/her character in the process of change and growth, as open to comment and alteration knotting together separated gestic to produce his character's coherence despite, or rather by means of, interruptions and jumps" (p.220).

Behind all of this flux and fluidity is Brecht's study of Marxism. In this respect, two statements by Marx (Selden and et al,2005, p.82) are worth mentioning because they have great impact on Brecht's works:

1. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness.
2. The philosophers have not only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change.

As change is a key term with reference to Marxism, change is also a significant feature of Brechtian theatre. Under the influence of Marxism, Brecht sees theatre as "real instrument for social change" (Pizzato,1998, p.9). And to bring about this change most effectively, Brecht not only changes the content of art (the subject matter) but also the mechanics and modes of representation. Terry Eagleton (2013) rightly refers to this thing "Brecht's experimental theatre was for Benjamin a model of how to change not merely the political content of art, but its very productive apparatus" (p.59). Thus, change can be noticed in all aspects of Brecht's plays including the concept of play writing, actor, character, audience, stage, direction, lightning and presentation. Seen from this point of view, Brecht's plays are rooted in Marxism and address such issues as class conflicts, poverty, violence, injustice, inflation, war in the plays like *The Three Penny Opera*; *Mother Courage and her Children*; and *Life of Galileo*. All this shows his concern and commitment to bring a change in social, political and economic conditions.

Though the influence of Marxism is prominent in his plays yet Brecht does not detach himself from the tradition of German theatre that clearly embodies the entertainment and instruction. Despite strong political implications, his plays have rich imagery, vitality, wit and irresistible humor. Brechtian theatre can be refurbished and reshaped and different terms that try to capture his concept of theatre are inadequate. Peter Brooker (2006) aptly comments "Brecht will have to be understood in the terms indicated above: not as a dogmatic ideologue whom it is easy to dismiss, but, less conveniently, as already profoundly open to change" (p.211). Thus, Brecht's vision of a theatre may be described as a Copernican revolution in the history of drama. That is why Carl Weber (2006) calls Brecht "one of the great innovators of world theatre" (p.188).

Besides Brecht's shifting attitude and openness in the choice of different terms, this concept of fluidity is evident in the dramaturgy of his theatre. Brecht introduced new ways of representing social issues on the stage through the effective collaboration of the dramaturg as a supervisor, writer, producer and designer. The representation of the subject matter, manner of production, design, and other dramaturgical elements can be refurbished in the light of feedback and suggestions. Hence, no revised text and production is a final product. It is subject to change. Despite the fact that Brecht himself was a great dramaturg, he benefited a lot from the dramaturges like Peter Palitzsch, Ruth Berlau, Hans Bunge, and especially Elisabeth Hauptmann, during his many years of work at the Berlin Ensemble. Later on, he employed these dramaturgical methods in his new but fluid concept of theatre. Mary Luckhurst (2006) refers to the fact "From this emerged the concept of the *Entwicklungsdramaturg* (the development dramaturg)" that revolutionized the course of the future drama" (p.206).

Conclusion:

Changeability (fluidity) is a significant characteristic of Brecht's theatre. The study of his plays and the scholars' views reveal that Brecht continued employing new and different terms since

none of the term was able to capture the totality of his concept of theatre that is based on new dramaturgy and open to change. Hence, it has no conclusive form and shape. This flux and fluidity distinguish Brechtian theatre from the traditional theatre and bring him at par with the great playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare.

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