

MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA BERTOLT BRECHT

Notes by Shibani Phukan

INTRODUCTION

German playwright, poet and theatre activist was born on 10 February, 1898 and died on August 14, 1956. He is best-known for his concept of epic-theatre which he puts forth as an alternative to the prevalent practices in the theatre in those times, particularly as a reaction to the theatre that preceded Brechtian theatre, or what popularly came to be known as epic theatre. His first play, Baal was produced in 1923 but his first professional production was Edward II in 1927. This period, following the events of the first World War which led to an unimaginable number of people losing their lives; resulted in a great sense of disappointment in Brecht. Consequently, Brecht developed a stringent anti-bourgeois attitude and turned towards Marxism. Between the years 1924 -33, Brecht lived in Berlin and worked with directors Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator, and his development of a new theatrical practice was influenced by them. This is the time that Brecht develops what came to be known as the epic-theatre.

In 1933, Brecht went into exile in Scandinavia, mainly Denmark, and later to the United States of America. His books were burnt in Germany and his citizenship revoked, he was almost completely cut-off from developments in German theatre. These were perhaps his most productive times and many of his well-known plays like Mother Courage and even The Good Person of Szechwan were written during this period. Brecht left the States in 1947 after he was accused of indulging in/ supporting activities against the State and spent a year in Zurich, Switzerland. This was an important year because it resulted in Brecht putting together his theory on theatre in his famous work, A Short Organum for the Theatre.

In 1949 Brecht went to Berlin and this laid the path for the formation of his own theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht continued to live in Berlin where most of his time was spent writing, producing and directing plays for the Ensemble. He continued to be viewed with suspicion and be derided for his radical views of theatre and passed away after a heart attack in 1956.

NOTABLE WORKS:

The Caucasian Chalk Circle
The Good Person of Szechwan
Mother Courage and her Children
The Threepenny Opera
The Business Affairs of Mr Jukius Caesar
Baal
A Short Organum for the Theatre
The Life of Galileo
A Manual of Piety

WHAT IS EPIC THEATRE?

Brecht uses the term epic theatre in July 1926. He theorises extensively on it in "A Short Organum for the Theatre." Termed dialectical theatre too, critic Arjun Ghosh writes that "it attempted to shape a process by which a critical attitude could be induced in the spectator." Epic Theatre is in principle opposed to Dramatic theatre or the principles of theatre laid down by Aristotle. This opposition is primarily based on Brecht's argument that Dramatic theatre maintains the status quo, does not disturb the power structures, or the class system. On the other hand, the very purpose of Epic theatre is to interrogate the given, to bring about critical thinking, thinking which would hopefully lead to action that would lead to radical transformation of society.

Let's look at some of the key differences between Dramatic and Epic theatre.

1. plot/narrative - When we talk about plot, we mean the storyline, we as readers or even viewers are motivated by our desire to find out what happens next. We are in a rush to find out how the story ends. When the focus is on the narrative, our focus is on how things things will unfold, how the story is being told.
2. implicates the spectator in a stage situation/turns the spectator into an observer - For Brecht, the ideal audience (notice, he does not use the word audience, but spectator) is that in a sports stadium. Why is it ideal? Because an audience in a stadium is involved but, importantly, still able to stand outside the situation and watch the proceedings in a semi-detached manner.
3. wears down his capacity for action/arouses his capacity for action - a key concept in Dramatic theatre is the concept of "catharsis" - a purging of emotions and feelings that leaves you empty. Brecht believes catharsis ultimately is guilty of perpetuating the status quo, maybe even of instilling a sense of complacency. On the other hand, Epic theatre forces the audience to confront the situation, adopt a perspective, have an opinion.
4. provides him with sensations/forces him to take decisions - Dramatic theatre makes you feel happy/sad/angry and so on, what you watch may enrage you, make you feel helpless, hopeless about the situation; but it does not necessarily force you to take a stand, does not allow the luxury of being a fence-sitter. Epic theatre you, as an audience are forced to do just that.
5. experience/picture of the world - Dramatic theatre is akin to watching a Hindi movie, where you get involved with the travails of the protagonist and experience their experiences as your own. However Epic theatre, in a way, provides you with a puzzle and, you, as the audience, have to join the dots and complete the picture. Depending on how your mind, thought process works, what your perspective and understanding is, may provide each one with a picture that is different from each others. What is important to note is how the latter invites active participation of the audience.
6. the spectator is involved in something/he is made to face something - while Dramatic theatre sucks you into the experience, you feel like you are part of the unfolding drama. On the other hand, Epic theatre makes the spectator face the situation head-on, wherein you are compelled to confront the situation, critically, analytically.
7. suggestion/argument - Dramatic theatre may suggest, hint at possible reasons for an event's occurrence but Epic theatre lays bare the reason. For example, if there is a scene about a girl who has been sexually exploited, Dramatic theatre would suggest that the reasons for that happening could be a patriarchal society which commodifies women and stereotypes them in such a way that any woman who does not prescribe to the stereotype is seen as fit game for exploitation. Epic theatre would actually depict through action and dialogue how this is the case and how such working is used to justify such despicable acts by a patriarchal society.
8. instinctive feelings are preserved/brought to the point of recognition - So you witness a poor man being beaten up, for no obvious reason, or a small misdemeanour. You feel a sense of outrage because it is obvious an injustice is being carried out. but you do not intervene, you don't necessarily question. That is what Dramatic theatre achieves. Epic theatre goes a step further. Such a situation as described, makes you angry, but you don't stop at that, your anger does not lead to you being overcome by it and resulting in your inability to take any action. In fact, your anger makes you question why you are feeling the way you are. Such questioning than leads to your discovery of the root of such problems or injustices we daily witness in our society.
9. the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience/the spectator stands outside, studies - this difference between the Dramatic and the Epic is a repetition of certain differences already explained. The difference lies in the reaction of the spectator, in Dramatic theatre, he/she gets involved in the drama that is unfolding; in Epic theatre, there is a certain distancing of one's self that is inculcated.

10. the human being is taken for granted/the human being is the object of the inquiry - this one is a critical difference between the two kinds of theatre. In Dramatic theatre, you watch a girl being molested, you feel disturbed, angry, you feel sorry for the girl, you think to yourself, "well, this is how girls are treated in our society. So disgusting!" In Epic theatre, you watch the girl being molested and you get angry, disgusted and this is what you ask, "Why does it happen? What can girls do to stop this? What can society do to stop this? Things must change. How can we bring about this change?"

11. he is unalterable/he is alterable and able to alter - what we are as human beings - rich, poor, happy, sad, privileged, disempowered ... is a process, a dynamic one, one if we are unsatisfied with, we can change, have the power to change. That's the belief of Epic theatre as opposed to Dramatic theatre.

12. eyes on the finish/eyes on the course - in Dramatic theatre, the spectator is focused on the how the story will end, what would happen in the end; in Epic theatre, the focus is on the details of the story itself, the path the story takes. In fact, for the purpose of Epic theatre, Brecht maintains that stories already known, those already in the public domain, work best. In the Indian context, for example, a retelling of a myth, or a story from a classic such as the Ramayana, would serve well the purpose of Epic theatre.

13. one scene makes another/each scene for itself - a play is usually divided into acts which are further divided into scenes. In Dramatic theatre, acts and scenes work on the basis of there being continuity. Epic theatre states that a spectator should be able to walk into a theatre at any point, and yet be able to make sense of a scene. In this particular idea, the impact of new technology, such as the advent of the radio, can be seen. When we listen to the radio, we switch it on and off as per our wish, yet we are able to understand the ongoings. Brecht feels, the audience of Epic theatre should be able to do the same.

14. growth/montage - as opposed to one scene leading to another, one event leading to another; Brecht recommended that Epic theatre should use the technique of hosting a montage of scenes, wherein one scene followed another but were independent of each other, like a series of photographs without an ostensible connection. This was a technique that Brecht borrowed from the movies, especially influenced by Eisenstein. The reasoning behind the preference for the montage was to put forth things without a cause-effect rationale brought into play, so as not to justify, explain things and thereby validate them in some way or the other.

15. linear developments/curves - in Dramatic theatre, the story unfolds through a linear narrative, begins with the beginning, ends with the end; one scene leads to another; one action to its consequence, and so on. In Epic theatre, the unfolding of the story takes place in a manner whereby the focus is not on the end, the telling of the story is determined by what it wants to say, what it wants to achieve through it telling, the questions it wants to raise.

16. Evolutionary determinism/jumps - determinism is the philosophical belief that events are completely determined by previously existing causes. It presupposes an absence of free will and suggests an absence of randomness of events that life is impacted by. Dramatic theatre supports such a belief while Epic theatre puts forth the events without necessarily explaining their antecedents.

17. Man as a fixed point/man as process - Epic theatre is premised on the possibility of change, of alteration. Man is seen as capable of change and of changing the world he inhabits. For example, somebody who is born into poverty, does not, should not accept it as a state of permanence, instead should look at possible ways of bringing about change by bringing about systemic changes.

18. Thought determines feeling/social being determines thought - society is composed of individuals, you and me. Each one of us are active members of society and it is we who determine

what kind of society we live in. If we do not like what is happening in our society, do not approve of something, each one of us have the power to change it. That is the Brechtian worldview.

19. feeling/reason - Dramatic feeling generates feelings, it overwhelms you, wears down your capacity for action. Epic theatre initiates a reasoning, whereby you question an event or a situation, you do not take anything as a given, you take action, you ultimately look at the possibility of change, radical change.

Armed with these key pointers about Epic theatre, please begin reading the play. More, later.

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