

Brechtian techniques

[Literature](#), [Drama](#)



Bertold Brecht (1898 – 1956) founded the so-called new, or “ epic theatre” that creatively reworked the principles of traditional “ Aristotelian” drama, in order for the plays to correspond to modern demands. Brecht characterised his position in dramatic art as social-critical. He was an active antifascist and thus centered his works on major historical events and gave them a social-political meaning. From the formal point of view, Brechtian techniques were based on defamiliarisation of the event. First and foremost, he transposed the event into third person.

He uses new concept of author’s time, i. e. time as it is perceived by the narrator of the play. The latter usually tells about the events that happened in the past and comments them. In doing so, he freely operates various layers of time, so that the whimsical structure of the story reminds that of a recollection or a dream. Finally, an important element of Brechtian drama is its increased convention, for instance the action can be interrupted by speaking stage directions aloud and or via usage of placards and signs.

The drama “ Zoot Suit” (1978) by Luis Valdez’ efficiently uses the Brechtian principles and techniques. Like many of Brecht’s dramas, this work is a passionate social protest that shows the injustice of the society with purely Brechtian didacticism. Valdez wrote this play at the end of “ turbulent seventies”, which in the US were characterised by increased social activity of minorities fighting for their rights, and Mexican Americans were among these.

Thus, the playwright addresses the times, when the Mexican American identity was only forming, and yet it was oppressed and discriminated by the police. Valdez implies that the same thing may happen or even happens in his times and protests against it. In this respect this play may be linked with

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activities of Guerilla theatre, which considered itself to be a cultural revolt against war and a mouthpiece of social protest movements. Valdez' play also has explicit antiwar and protest connotations, and in accordance with Brecht's conception, his art serves political purposes.

Furthermore, action is presented and commented by the narrator, the fictional El Pachuco, which is the condensed embodiment of Mexican spirit (pachucos were Mexican American youth who emphasized their Mexican identity and wore zoot suits). He converses with the protagonist of the story, Henry Reyna, and in some episodes interferes into action (for instance, he takes the place of Rudy Reyna in an uneven fight with sailors). Moreover, from the very first words Valdez emphasizes Brechtian convention. For instance, the drop curtain is "giant facsimile of a newspaper front page" (1, 1992).

Besides in his first monologue EL Pachuco says that he is an actor who plays El Pachuco and recollects this myth. This indicates another Brechtian technique. The narrated action takes place in the past. The setting, as described by the author, emphasizes that the age of zoot suits is in the past: "The somber shapes and outlines of pachuco images hang subtly, black on black, against a back-ground of heavy fabric evoking memories and feelings like an old suit hanging forgotten in the depths of a closet somewhere, sometime" (1, 1992).

At the same time, in the end El Pachuco says that this legend still lives and is topical, for at least he is interested in telling it. However, this is not the objective past time of Aristotelian drama, but rather narrator's individual perception. El Pachuco can retard action by making the judge repeat for the

second time that “ zoot haircuts will be retained throughout the trial for purposes of identification” (ibid). He also uses sudden retrospections, for example when Henry mentions Saturday night dance, El Pachuco snaps fingers and makes this event repeat.

In another instant, he skips witness' statement, saying “ You know what. We've already heard from that bato. Let's get on with the defense” (1, 1992). Besides the conventionality is emphasized by various other interruptions of action. An interesting example of this is when the arrested pachucos stand in a line, the Press starts and they continue the headline. In another episode the Press“ moves the bundles of newspapers on the floor to outline the four corners of a jail cell”, i. e.

makes the decorations for the next scene in jail (1, 1992). To sum up, the play “ Zoot Suit” by Luis Valdez exemplified Brechtian understanding of social-political role of art and demonstrates a number of Brechtian techniques of the “ new theatre”, among them accentuated conventionality of action, transposition into third person (use of narrator) and into the past, connected with the present, and forcible handling of time. References 1. Valdes, L. (1992). Zoot Suit. Zoot Suit and Other Plays. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press. Pg 22-94.