

The art of alienation in brecht's work



Writing in the Germany of the 1920s, Brecht shattered the then staple notions of dramatic theatre, with his propagation of the Epic theatre. In terms of play righting, his was a move away from the Isben model of the well made¹ play; in terms of acting as well he led a departure from the Stanislavsky style of realism. Interestingly enough, this maverick Marxist playwright was also highly didactic and authoritarian. Not only did he have a very specific brief for actors on how and how not to act, but he also made very clear the role and the function of the audience. Impelled by a Marxist perspective he insisted that man and society could be intellectually analysed. His demands of drama were high; he wrote, " The urgent revolution of the theatre must start with a transformation of the stage (we do not ask for an audience, but a community, not a stage, but a pulpit." Theatre then, was an activity meant to be part of a larger social revolution. But Brecht did not ascribe to the " art reflects life" kind of philosophy, he was very well aware of the possibilities art held as a carrier of ideology. " If art reflects life" Brecht wrote " it does so with special mirrors". It was these " special mirrors" that Brecht sought to invert, in his work, creating a revolutionary new kind of epic theatre. Karl Marx was to call religion " the opium of the masses"; Brecht extended this thought to dramatic theatre, when he called it a " narcotic". He strove to remove those narcotic elements of dramatic theatre through a highly complex system. Firstly of course, he rejected the paradigm of dramatic theatre; he insisted that his theatre offer multifaceted social and political themes, with a conspicuous rejection of conclusions. The resolution of a play was to come from the world, and not the stage. The audience thus was to be part of a greater social process that they would then in turn instigate. The Aristotelian cathartic emotions of pity

and fear were useless to Brecht; he wanted the audience's rationality to be engaged and not their emotional identification. The idea was that one was not to share the experience, but study the experience. To this end, he worked on creating alienating effects - simple anti-illusory techniques to remind the spectators that they were watching an enactment of reality, and not reality itself. One such technique was to suddenly flood the stage with a harsh white light, or to have a series of inane jingles sung at critical junctures. A person might streak across the stage holding a placard. By doing away with a narrator, Brecht also did away with the speaking voice that might otherwise hold an audience in thrall. Scenery was minimalist and obviously representative. Nothing was to take away, in short from the message. Actors had a special brief in such a play. They were given instructions on how to hold themselves, the limbs must be loose, and the neck muscles not taut, because tautness might magically¹ draw the eyes of the audience. The speech must be direct, without cadence and sing song tones that might otherwise put the audience in torpor. Brecht was influenced by German expressionism in its insistence on theme or idea centred plays, rather than plot centric plays. As a result of which his play are never linear, they ignore the conventions of growth, progress, movement towards a climax, or even development in the ordinary sense. In *Mother Courage and Her Children* for example the scenes are loosely held together, and episodic to the extent that they seem fragments of random events occurring over time. As a result of which character is highlighted not as a site of special psychological interest, but as a function of circumstance. Changed circumstances can turn Eilif from a hero, valorised for war-like behaviour, to a coward executed for unnecessary bloodshed. Even opinions can change

dramatically when situations change. Mother Courage may say, " Curse the war!" when her fortunes are low, but might reply angrily to criticism of it at another time with " I won't let you spoil my war for me! Destroys the weak does it? Well what does peace do for fem huh? War feeds its people better". What Brecht also achieves by such structuring is to make apparent the contradictions that become part and parcel of a state of war. But we are also made well aware that " war's a business like all the rest/ It's still about survival of the best". These contradictions then, are a part of the disease of capitalism, and one witnesses the impossibility of Mother Courage reconciling compassion and tenderness with the values of business. Frustratingly, Brecht's characters do not grow. The figure of Mother Courage wheeling her little cart off stage at the end of the play, having lost all three children is pathetic but not sympathetic when she cries " Back to Business". Having stemmed our natural instinct of identification, Brecht writes " Even if Mother Courage learns nothing else at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her". Brecht seems a mixture of intellectual sophistication and psychological naïveté. On one hand, his was a revolutionary new kind of dramatic theatre, using epic forms to throw light on the hidden absurdity of life if warped by the values that come with war and big business. Where success is associated with virtue and not the other way around. He tried to bring to an audience's attention, the human costs of this way of life. His characters operate like machinations of their functional world. But there are many ways of seeing. Brecht once wrote " Nothing is more important than learning to think crudely. Crude thinking is the thinking of great men." For a dramatic form to endure however, beyond an individual proponent, perhaps something more than this is required. A more realistic

assessment of mankind might have suggested to Brecht that ultimately, a drama of ideas may not be enough for an audience of human beings.