

Brecht's the good
person of szechwan
is an apt
representation of the
theory of ep...

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Brecht's Epic Theatre is a theatre of destroyed illusions and a wide awake audience which took birth from the theory of Korschian Marxism which saw ideology as a material force that served as an important tool of dominance. It is a theatre of instruction and hence is also termed Didactic theatre and because of the binary opposition present in its themes it is also known as Dialectical Theatre.

The biggest aim of Brechtian plays is to alienate the audience to bring about an understanding which can affect change, Brecht terms this phenomenon as the *Verfremdung's Effekt* (Alienation Effect or the A-effect), which comes from the Chinese play tradition. The audience is never one with the actor, they are always aware that the play is not real and that whatever is being presented on stage is not reality but a depiction of a certain reality.

The 'A-Effect' is also known as the technique of defamiliarization wherein the familiar is made strange through alienation tropes such as addressing the audience directly, changing clothes in front of the audience, use of songs etc, which ensures that the audience is at all times rational, intellectual, and act as scientific observers so that they are able to question the industrial world and its authoritarian structures. As Walter Benjamin while summarizing Brecht's theatre said " for its public the stage is no longer ' the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area.

For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy. For its text, the performance is no longer a virtuoso interpretation, but its rigorous

control. For its performance, the text is no longer a basis of that performance, but a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performance are marked..." 1 and so Bertolt Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre transforms into its praxis in his play *The Good Person of Szechwan*.

The Good Person of Szechwan is a purely Marxist play that deals with the social conditions of its milieu and how the people who are put in those situations react to it and towards one another. The major theme being that of survival in a world that is ruled not by goodness of character but by the evil and corruption of the society. The juxtaposition of poverty with plentitude is a leit motif in the play. Wang's 'The Water Seller's Song In The Rain' brings forth this juxtaposition beautifully when he laments, "I sell water. Who will taste it? -Who would want to in this weather? All my labour has been wasted

Fetching these few pints together. I stand shouting by my Water! And nobody thinks it Worth stopping and buying Or greedily drinks it. " 2 Since its rainy season and there is plenty of water no one bothers buying the water from Wang and this plentitude becomes poverty for Wang. We start to pity Wang's character when we realize that he is a proletariat and is burdened by poverty, but Brecht alienates us from Wang's character by showing us his cheating and swindling side so that we rationalize his character and see him as the representative of the proletariat ideology of swindling and cheating.

There is no Bourgeois enemy present in the play. The problem is within the proletariat and not amongst the proletariat and bourgeois. The problems that

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Shen Teh or the other characters face are due to their social conditions. The province of Szechwan can be seen as a microcosm of what is happening all over the world. Throughout the play there is constant reference to " hunger. " Hunger is seen as annihilating honor. Shen Teh's hesitancy to take the God's in is because she has an empty stomach. She says "...I'm afraid that a rumbling stomach is no respecter of persons. 3 The motif of hunger and poverty can also be seen in Brecht's other play The Life of Galileo. The play starts with Galileo saying " Put the milk on table..." 4 and Andrea replying " Mother says we must pay the milkman, if we don't he'll be describing a circle round us, Signor Galilei" 5 and later on when Galileo says "...and I like to eat decently. It's when I'm eating I get most inspiration. A rotten age. They haven't paid me as much as the man who drives their wine-carts. " 6 We are always reminded of the juxtaposition of plentitude with poverty.

The play is dialectical in its split between Shen Teh's self fulfillment and Shui Ta's self preservation. It is the " inevitable clash between desire and fact and as the paradox of ends and means. These are two sides of the same coin.

Shen Teh's wish to be generous must employ Shui Ta's profiteering meanness, or else she would be deprived of her charitable self. " 7

Prosperity is associated with lack of goodness and " social conditions twist the natural goodness of human beings into opposites" 8 and hence if Shen Teh wants to prosper then she needs to give into Shui Ta's calculating nature.

In The Good Person of Szechwan we have constant interruptions that are brought about by the musical interludes and all these songs work to alienate

the audience from the play and to make them question the situation being presented in front of them. They are made to question the worth of Shen Teh's goodness as it leaves her not ennobled but economically emaciated. Walter Benjamin says that, " the interrupting of action is one of the principle concerns of epic theatre. Therein lies the formal achievements of Brecht's songs with their crude, heart rendering refrains. 9 and hence ' The Water Seller's Song In The Rain' comes just after the love scene between Shen Teh and Yang Sun, disrupting the audience from getting involved in the play and again bringing their attention to the dialectics between poverty and plentitude. Brecht says that " in the epic theatre moral arguments only took second place. Its aim was less to moralize than to observe. " 10 So we see that Shen Teh's goodness is constantly thwarted by the social circumstances and harsh necessities of survival in a competitive world but no moralizing comments are made.

The play begins on a note of despair and ends with one. For Shen Teh to survive it is necessary that Shui Ta also survives. The God's in the play are ignorant, humanized and a satire on the hegemony in Christianity, questioning the absolutism of Christianity in the early twentieth Century. Instead of one god head we are presented with three Gods and none of them can do anything to lift Shen Teh out of the drudgery that she is a part of even though she is good.

In the trial scene the gods are seen as nothing but impostors, their omniscience and all powerful stature is questioned. The idea of justice is questioned, deconstructed and done away with. Neither is virtue rewarded

nor vice punished, instead vice is seen as a means to an end. Shui Ta is not punished for any of the crimes and Shen Teh is not rewarded for her goodness. Brecht here blends divine justice with legal justice by making the Gods don on the attire of the magistrate to mock at divine justice. It is a Marxist onslaught on the institutionalization of religion.

In his other play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* we have the character of Azdak whose method of delineating legal justice is more serious in purpose and intent as compared to the three Gods here who appear as mere fools. One is forced to question if justice is being delayed or if there is no concept of justice in an industrial world. The open ended-ness of the trial scene erodes the moralistic nature and it prises upon the mind of the audience and affects change. Brecht in all his plays comments on "Jetztzeit", a term that Walter Benjamin coined for the presence of "now" in Brechtian plays.

According to Walter Benjamin, "history for Brecht was an ever present arena, never as with Lukacs a thing of past" and hence we see that *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan* or *The Life of Galileo* all have topical references in the World War I and II, the failure of the Russian Revolution/Communism/Dictatorship and questioning of the viability and feasibility of science in a post Hiroshima-Nagasaki world, respectively. Also epic theatre is literarized. "The literarization of theatre by means of verbal formulas, posters, captions, is intended to, and will, make what is shown on the stage unsensational. 11 The performance is not aimed to draw the audience into the play but to make them stand at the periphery so that they question the bourgeoisie ideology and break free from it, so that the

proletariat is emancipated and socialism can be constructed. Brecht believes that society can be changed through intellectual action and that is the reason that his plays are so highly dialectical. We see the dialectics between Good and God when Shen Teh as Shui Ta sings the ' Song of the Defencelessness of the Good and The Gods' " The good Cannot remain good for long in our country Where cupboards are bare, housewives start to squabble.

Oh, the divine commandments Are not much use against hunger. So why can't the god's share out what they've created Come down and distribute the bounties of nature And allow us, once hunger and thirst has been sated To mix with each other infriendshipand pleasure? " 12 Gods here are seen as privileging the aristocrats and Christianity is seen as a perpetrator of class difference. The motif of hunger is again visible in the song. Hunger can not be satiated by following the commandments, one need to havemoneyto buyfoodand that money comes not from praying but by being economically independent and well of.

When the audience hears the song they realize the futility of religion in an economic world. It brings to the forefront the debate between spirituality and materialism. It makes the spectators question both the value of a bourgeoisie society and that of religion. Being but a Marxist play every theme is given a Marxist interpretation, even the idea of love and marriage. Shen Teh has to choose between Yang Sun and Mr. Shu Fu. It is as Shui Ta that she favors Mr. Shu Fu for he can provide her with a future but as Shen Teh her emotions sway her towards Yang Sun.

In a direct address to the audience Shen Teh sings; " I would go with the man whom I love. I would not reckon what it costs me. I would not consider what is wiser. I would not know whether he loves me. I would go with the man that I love. " 13 " As Shui Ta she knows the worthlessness of her charming but rascally lover Sun. But with her emotional feminine self, as Shen Teh, she cannot give up the physical passion and tenderness that bind her to him. In Shen Teh's love the drive for self-fulfillment and the need for self preservation clash in hopeless combat that can never be decided. 14 Brecht in The Good Person of Szechwan presents us with a Marxist theme, a dialectical debate between poverty and plentitude, goodness and god, religion and materialism etc, all of which is made apparent to the audience by the alienation effect brought about by the musical interludes that are present through out the course of the play, Shen Teh's changing clothes in front of the audience, direct address to the audience; in an attempt to make sure that the play raises questions in the minds of the audience and breaks their identification with the bourgeoisie ideology.

In totality Brecht's play The Good Person of Szechwan is an apt representation of his epic or intellectual theatre that is built on the concept of critical theory translating into intellectual action on stage wherein Brecht seeks to illumine historically specific features of a milieu in order to show how that milieu influenced, shaped and often battered and destroyed the individual. Instead of focusing on the universal elements of human situations and fate, Brecht on the other hand is interested in depicting the attitude that people adopted towards each other in a specific historical situation or context.

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