

# Brecht's the life of galileo: overturning 'naturalist' theatre



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Brecht's development of epic theatre challenged many aspects of the popular conventions of naturalism and expressionism that were prevalent during his rise to prominence in the 1920s. In *The Life of Galileo*, elements of epic theatre such as the use of song and verse, and, most notably, the presentation of arguments and reasoning as opposed to emotion and feeling, would have disconcerted an audience predominantly exposed to naturalistic concepts. This is due to the radically different way in which one must observe and react to the drama. In this essay, I will evaluate the profound variances between the conventional naturalistic or 'dramatic' theatre, and the new 'epic' theatre formulated by Brecht. Brecht and his contemporaries were exposed to the naturalistic drama of playwrights such as Gerhardt Hauptmann, prior to the development of Brecht's own practice of epic theatre. Audience expectation included the principle of the suspension of disbelief, whereby the audience would forget they are watching a play and become complicit in the action. Characters were explored and developed in depth in order to connect the audience on a sympathetic level; the morals, sympathies and judgments were handed directly to the audience rather than suggested. This was true of expressionist theatre, which was also popular at this time. Esslin has criticised this style of theatre, as, in his opinion, it seeks to create 'the maximum impression of emotional intensity by indulgence in hysterical outbursts and paroxysms of uncontrolled roaring and inarticulate anguish' and included 'orgies of vocal excess and apoplectic breast beating' (Esslin 1970: 88). Indeed, Brecht found such dramatic theatre to be lacking in intellectual provocation, and thus wanted to produce a style of theatre which demanded more, mentally, from the audience. Rorrison notes that 'from the beginning of his career Brecht had fought a running battle against

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the conventional theatre of his day which he dismissed as 'culinary', since, like expert cooking, it delighted the senses without impinging on the mind' (Rorrison: xxxiv). Indeed, Brecht went on to develop a type of theatre that solicited the audience to make informed and subjective judgments about the issues presented. He questioned: 'how can theatre be entertaining and at the same time instructive? How can it be taken...from a place of illusion to a place of insight?' (Brecht 1939). In *The Life of Galileo*, Brecht presents a scientific debate concerning the universe; the audience is not expected to identify with the characters, as they are in naturalistic theatre. Indeed, Galileo is a fundamentally non-heroic protagonist, in that we are not privy to his thought processes as one may be in one a Shakespearean character's soliloquy, and Brecht invites the audience to make judgements on the scientific debate and not to feel catharsis or sympathy with characters. This would be a radical challenge for those used to applying their empathy rather than their reason to their experience of drama. Unlike the 'fourth wall' convention of naturalistic theatre, Brecht used the *verfremdungseffekt* or 'alienation technique' to ensure that the audience was not influenced by their emotions and could make subjective conclusions about the historical account. Certainly, in *The Life of Galileo*, the characters are rarely explored or presented in a way that would suggest obvious spectator sympathy, as the scenes consist almost entirely of academic discourses and demonstrations; the scenes are representational of historical events (presented for didactic purposes), which differs from naturalistic drama that portrays action to be happening in the present, right before the eyes of the spectators (intended to produce an emotional response). Brecht's development of the principle of *gestus* additionally helps to remind the

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audience that the actors are not the characters themselves, and are merely accounting for a past event. Unlike the approach expected by Brecht's contemporary audience, whereby the actor works to identify with their character, *gestus* is the concept of representing a basic social attitude in a stylized way, which helps to make a point rather than exploiting, on an emotional level, the actor-audience relationship. For instance, The First Secretary replies '(mechanically)' (Brecht 1980: 61); the characterisation is representational of a type of role, as opposed to a life-like impersonation. In Brecht's productions, 'no emotional faking was tolerated' (Volker 1979: 72) and actors were asked to almost narrate the characters' gestures and movements rather than becoming the character. Smith notes that, 'by means of *gestus*, epic theatre draws the spectator away from the well-made play, with its closed forms and consumer ideologies, breaking the play's conventions open to view and leaving them open at the play's conclusion. *Gestus* attempts to energize the spectator to continue the text outside the theatre' (Smith: 493). Brecht's intentions are indeed to allow his audience to make their own conclusions of the information they have been presented; the 'naturalist' audience would have been more familiar with being spoon-fed a conclusive moral or feeling. Brecht first developed *gestus* to satirise fascists, but also 'probably sensed...that dilemmas facing women, as estranged and disenfranchised members of society, would articulate his own views' (Smith: 491). In scene 3, Galileo dismisses Virginia's interest in the telescope, saying that 'it's not a toy' (Brecht 1980: 31), when she asks to have a look. He is then 'Talking past his daughter to Sagredo' (Brecht 1980: 33). This demonstrates how Brecht undermines his characters to make us maintain a critical detachment; his inclusion of such obvious sexism

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(acknowledged in the stage directions) illustrates how Brecht's Marxist beliefs encourage the viewer to challenge the status quo. Thus, here Brecht demonstrates the injustices of the privileged towards those with less power. Certainly, 'the success of gestus depends on the production's sensitivity to context and audience' (Smith: 494). Therefore, by using this reference, Brecht is suggesting the importance of social change through his epic principles. Although unsettling, such issues raised in this play were of relevance to the contemporary audience. Indeed, through the satirical nature of gestus, the audience is exposed more explicitly to the themes and purpose of the play than the conventional naturalistic theatre. In Scene 6, the stage directions describe the atmosphere as 'extremely hilarious' (Brecht 1980: 50). Pathos may be expected in this scene as, in naturalistic theatre, the tension as Galileo awaits the results of his case would be created so that the audience may sympathise with the character. However, giving it a 'hilarious' atmosphere (with the monks comically mocking Galileo) steers away from this so that the audience may make their own judgments about the action without being made to feel a certain emotion. This would have been a peculiar change for the spectators used to the building of suspense and tension that articulates how the audience should feel. Through this, Brecht does not enforce a specific emotion on the observers, so that they may make independent judgments of the action. In *The Life of Galileo*, Brecht uses imagery as rhetoric devices, which is further indicative of a narrative in place of a dramatic plot, exploring less into character and more into the issue in the storyline. For instance, in scene 7, Galileo gives the example of when he was young: 'When I was so high...I stood on a ship and called out 'The shore is moving away.' Today I realise

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that the shore was standing still and the ship moving away' (Brecht 1980: 57) This simple, yet effective, image that he uses to explain the realisation of new theories and discoveries in the world of science serves as a rhetorical device, aiding Brecht's argument, rather than the audience's relationship with the protagonist. It also helps to shift the perspectives of the audience and challenge their fundamental assumptions. This is similarly true of the example of the oyster and the pearl that Galileo uses to describe the significance of reason over faith (Brecht 1980: 66), which would feel, to the audience, more like a stylistic argument than realistic dialogue. Brecht outlines the difference between dramatic and epic theatre as being concerned with reason rather than feeling. Indeed, these images are fluently delivered rhetoric, and therefore less naturalistic, and more of an 'argument' than a 'suggestion'; 'epic theatre was to tell a story in a way that invited the audience to consider the events involved and then to make their own assessment of them' (Rorrison: xxxvi) In scene 7, Brecht uses Lorenzo di Medici's famous poem: 'this lovely springtime cannot last/ So pluck your roses before May is past' (Brecht 1980: 60). This reference to Galileo's limited timespan in which to research his theories portrays the information the audience requires in a stylized way, so that they are being given details of the plot rather than learning more about the thought processes of the characters, which would cause increased audience sympathy and withdraw from a subjective assessment of events. Additionally, scenes 10 and 15 include the songs and role-play with puppets. The songs are more obviously 'gestic' than the dialogue (much like the 'epic' demonstrations of fundamental theories presented in comic and infantile ways, such as the apple or the chair demonstrations of the rotation of the earth around the

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sun) which would have been more unsettling for an audience accustomed to viewing realistic action. It is, however, of particular importance to portray these 'epic' moments as the whole play is based on the arguments for and against Galileo's theories, so must be understood by the audience even if it seems less naturalistic; the emphasis, in Brecht's productions, was on the audience's own informed judgement and less on displaying a realistic story. The Life of Galileo, in particular, is anti-emotionalist because the theme of the play asks the audience to use this independent judgment rather than empathy; Galileo's theories of reason over faith directly mirror Brecht's theories of the significance of personal reflection over dictated catharsis. Slide projections and music aid the verfremdungseffekt by commenting on the action itself, so that 'the audience can take pleasure in taking issue with the commentary. Slides and music, let us say, create a kind of meta-representation of events' (Stewart and Nicholls: 60) or 'anti-illusionistic devices to eliminate suspense' (Rorrison: xxxviii)- for example, when, in scene 3 Galileo's letter appears on a curtain. An audience used to naturalist theatre would find this unsettling because of the way it draws attention to the illusion being presented. However, 'to suggest that scenic headings are devices which destroy suspense is like saying that newspaper headlines make reading the stories unnecessary' (Needle: 201). Indeed, in epic theatre, we need to know the outcome, and with anti-naturalistic theatre we are more engaged with the consciously artificial process rather than the dramatic resolution. By choosing a well-known historical narrative with a renowned outcome, Brecht was left free to experiment with presentation that was less expected by the audience. Unlike most naturalistic plays of the 1920s, Brecht's plays, including The Life of Galileo, were presented using a <https://assignbuster.com/brechts-the-life-of-galileo-overturning-naturalist-theatre/>

neutral and bare stage, with minimal and representation props and set. 'The bareness of the stage exposed the action in a cool, unatmospheric space which was intended to counterbalance the relative lack of epic form in the writing' (Rorrison: xl). Indeed, Galileo, unlike most of Brecht's work, includes a linear plot with no narrator or third party commentary, making it, in some ways, more accessible for an audience with the expectation of a naturalistic style. However, this unrealistic, representational set forces the audience to acknowledge that they are facing the issues presented in the play, rather than being involved in a stage-world through a fourth wall, which would be a radically different way of viewing for this audience. Ultimately, while dramatic theory is based on Aristotelian aesthetics that influence the audience to accept things as they are, the Church similarly wishes to preserve the traditional beliefs of the universe. In this sense, Brecht is challenging both Aristotle and the Church with his epic drama and his representation of Galileo's theories, which both aim to initiate social change. Therefore, Brecht chose the subject matter deliberately as consonant with his theme of reason over emotion. This would have certainly unsettled the expectations of an audience accustomed to naturalism, principally because of the way it requires a didactic rather than an emotional investment in the story.

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