

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE IN THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS WITH REFERENCE TO BRECHT'S *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

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Abstract

As one of the most influential figures in theatre, Bertolt Brecht has established his legacy in the world theatre. His modern avant-garde has taken a step beyond the traditional well – made plays. *Mother Courage and Her Children* is an example of Brecht's concept of modern Epic Theatre intended to display estrangement effect which is achieved through different use of plot, the events of each scene, juxtaposition, actors changing characters and costume on stage, and even narration; It does not only defy the concept of well – made play, but also disregards the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. This paper tries to investigate Brecht's theatre as a modern avant-garde and to trace defiance of traditional conventions in his masterpiece, *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Keywords: Epic theatre, Bertolt Brecht, theatrical convention, tradition

1. INTRODUCTION

Born in the year 1898 in Germany, Bertolt Brecht is one of the most brilliant practitioners of German theatre. He was an innovative German playwright, theatre director, socialist, poet, dramatist, theoretician who changed the direction of European theatre better to say the world theatre. Influenced by the Elizabethans, Greek-tragedy, fair-grounded entertainments, Chinese, Japanese and Indian theatre he in a sense revolutionized the theatre. His theatrical theories and stage conventions were a revolt against the contemporary stage practices of the day. Bertolt Brecht termed the modern theatre as Epic Theatre, specifically the concept of "alienation" and "gestus". He believed that it was not enough to observe the world, it was necessary to change it.

Brecht's realism tolerates no heroism and his analysis is merciless and unsentimental. At times his vision can seem too harsh and uncompromising, too difficult for an audience to be involved in the kind of

complex seeing that he was so keen to promote. However, when set against the background of a world collapsing into barbarism and war, his works, *Mother Courage* in particular, is an extraordinary vision of the darkest moment of a very dark century. If the twentieth century saw the worst wars in history, Brecht's play embodies the greatest plea for peace, an opposition to Fascism.

2. METHODOLOGY

The method used by the authors is descriptive and analytical; they have also used library sources like books, journals, magazines, publications, reviews.

3. DISCUSSION

Brecht revolutionized the art of the theatre itself. Like all the best playwrights – Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen – he was a practical man of the theatre. He understood how the theatre worked and was committed to making it into a relevant, provocative and dynamic art form. German artistic life has always had a tendency towards intellectual pronouncements and Brecht's own theoretical bent needs to be seen as part of this tradition. It should be stressed, however, that Brecht was highly skeptical of abstraction and it is unfortunate that he is as often caricatured as an incomprehensible intellectual with his head in the clouds. His experimentation did not take place in isolation and was part of a much broader attempt to create a new kind of theatre, capable of reflecting the 'dark times'; furthermore, many of his ideas were drawn from elsewhere, above all Shakespeare and other classical writers.

Brecht was determined that the 'audience shouldn't hang up its brain with its coat and hat'; he wanted to create a kind of theatre that could not only reflect reality but help to change it and argued that everything including poetry, character, wit, music, design, and theatricality should be used to realize this all-important goal. For him, the modern theatre mustn't be judged by its success in satisfying the audience's habits but by its success in transforming them. It needs to be questioned not about its degree of conformity with the 'eternal laws of the theatre' but about its ability to master the rules governing the great social processes of our age; not about whether it manages to interest the spectator in buying a ticket, but about whether it manages to interest him in the world.

Brecht felt that the distance between actors and audience was not great enough, that one tried much to *move* the audience, to touch them, and not enough to *show* them; in other words, too many participational relationships, too many images, not enough objectivity. Brecht tried to create a kind of theatre which would encourage the audience to look at what was being presented in such a way that they would draw conclusions about the society in which they lived. This led to the "alienation effect" (estrangement), one of the most misunderstood terms in the Brechtian vocabulary. Essentially, the alienation effect is achieved when the audience is encouraged to re-examine its preconceptions and to look at the familiar in a new way, with an interest in how it can and should be changed. This requires the actor to both inhabit his character and to remember that he is showing it to the audience. The danger with identification, Brecht argued, was that it prevented the actor from commenting on his character and stopped his performance from having an active purpose. It also prevents the audience from looking at the action with any degree of critical distance. Crucially, Brecht wanted his actors to be clear about what each scene was trying to show and made the understanding of the play's intentions fundamental to the performance.

Brecht asked his actors to tell their story with as much objectivity as possible: just as witnesses of a car crash or a murder or a football match might describe what they saw, drawing attention to the decisive moments, asking the listeners to look at what happened from a variety of perspectives, helping them come to their own judgments, so in rehearsal Brecht encouraged his actors to present their stories in the third person. At other times he asked them to draw attention to particularly important moments in their story, adding 'instead of responding like this, he responded like that'. These were all just exercises, but could have a powerful effect on the performance. Brecht often asked his actors to be involved in the practical presentation of the play – moving chairs, putting on new costumes, and so on – in full view of the audience. The effect of this is twofold: it helps

the actor present each moment with clarity and allows him to demonstrate his own attitude to what is being shown.

4. MOTHER COURAGE:

A Brief Summary

Anna Fierling (AKA Mother Courage) has been enduring for a long time, traveling with nothing except a supply wagon pulled along by her adult children: Eilif, Swiss Cheese, and Katrin. Throughout the play, though she does show concern for her children, she seems more interested in profit and financial security, rather than the safety and well-being of her offspring. She has a love/hate relationship with war. She loves war because of its potential economic benefits. She hates war because of its destructive, unpredictable nature. She has the nature of a gambler, always trying to guess just how long the war will last so that she can take a risk and buy more supplies to sell.

She fails dreadfully as a parent whenever she is focused on her business. When she fails to keep track of her eldest son, Eilif, he joins the army. When Mother Courage tries to haggle for the life of her second son (Swiss Cheese), she offers a low payment in exchange for his freedom; her stinginess results in his execution. Eilif is also executed, and although his death is not a direct result of her choices, she misses her only chance to visit with him because she is at the market working her business instead of at church, where Eilif expects her to be. Near the play's conclusion, Mother Courage is again absent when her daughter Katrin martyrs herself in order to save innocent townspeople.

Despite losing all of her children by the end of the play, it is arguable that Mother Courage never learns anything, thus never experiences an epiphany or transformation. In his editorial notes, Brecht explains that, "It is not incumbent on the playwright to give Mother Courage insight at the end" (120). Rather, Brecht's protagonist catches a glimpse of social awareness in Scene Six, but it is quickly lost, never to be regained, as the war wears on, year after year.

The Defiance of the Conventional Theatre

All of Brecht's greatest characters are constructed on contradictory principles: the 'good woman' Shen Teh has to become the bad man Shui Ta in order to survive; Mother Courage sacrifices her children in order to make a living; Galileo abandons pure scientific pursuit because of its implications; and Puntilla, who is generous when drunk, reverts to brutality when sober. The point is that these many contradictions are not the result of poor characterization – rather, they are realistic portraits of the way that real people behave in a contradictory world.

Brecht uses music and songs to interrupt the action of the play, increasing the alienation effect and preventing emotional identification with the characters. The music should be gestic, able to convey or underscore the social relationships between the characters. Bloom notes that when *Mother Courage* was first performed in Switzerland, the audience "identified with the protagonist and began to feel pity toward her as an individual". Brecht explains that this is an undesirable response, for if the audience identifies with Courage in 'The Song of the Great Capitulation', it will "increase the spectator's own tendencies to resignation and capitulation" rather than putting him "in a position to feel the beauty and attraction of a social problem" (Bloom, 2002, 28). What Brecht did for theatre was to open up the possibilities for the audience's experience of theatre. Brecht involved the audience in the formation of a rational, intellectual criticism of established ideologies in his plays and aimed to effect change within society.

The greatness of the play, and the reason why it is one of Brecht's most enduring masterpieces, lies in something more than its astonishingly well drawn characters, and its passionately held insights. For, like Shakespeare, Brecht's historical imagination, coupled with his startling dramatic technique, creates the illusion of

an entire world, caught in a terrifying and endless struggle between two sets of interchangeable masters, disguising themselves as different religions, but supported by the very people whose participation and suffering keep the war going. The result is a twentieth-century riposte to the classical drama of kings and queens, a history 'written from the bottom up', and Brecht focuses in detail on real people – soldiers, peasants, tradesmen, prostitutes and even generals – finding ways of feeding themselves and trying to survive the insanity which surrounds them. His characters are often distorted and dehumanized by the world in which they live, but they are astonishingly true to life and recognizable.

Not an Aristotelian Tragedy!

On the other hand, *Mother Courage* cannot be considered an Aristotelian Tragedy, although some critics have argued that, in line with Brecht's guidance about *Mother Courage's* failure to learn, the play is perhaps *Mother Courage's* tragedy. After all, her children die and she never profits appreciably from the war. Such a discussion depends much on how "tragedy" is defined. For instance, it is worth noting that, in addition to *Mother Courage's* failure to learn, Brecht assigns each of her children an Aristotelian "tragic flaw" which is an essential part of each tragedy. This flaw is repeated throughout the play: Eilif is "dashing," Swiss Cheese is "honest," and Katrin "suffers from pity."

After reading a theoretical work on tragedy, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, one could perhaps ask these questions: is *Mother Courage* herself responsible for the events of the play? Is she endowed with an error in her fate? Isn't she endowed with evil characteristics? Is she as blameless as Shakespearean Hamlet? Would events go differently if only *Mother Courage* were different? Does the play arouse a *catharsis* as the curtain comes down? Is the play merely sad or a true tragedy? Does she fulfill the needs for the Aristotelian tragic hero? Indeed what matters here is the fact that she gets profit out of war, and this act is a deliberate one. Thus a rejection of her being a tragic hero. What she does not care is the country and people, even her own children. She does not act as Ibsen's *Nora* does in the first place.

As far as the plot of *Mother Courage* is concerned, *the play* does not adhere to the Aristotelian model of plot and thus does not involve a structure of rising and falling action, climax, and catharsis. In some sense, each scene exists for itself.

In general, the aim of Brecht's theatre is not to show the audience the inexorable truths of their existence, but to show that man "is alterable and able to alter" ("The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre", p. 37). Brecht's appropriation and development of Piscator's epic theatre in reaction against traditional Aristotelian dramatic forms of theatre involves techniques to prevent the spectator's emotional identification with the characters and to ensure that the spectator 'stands outside, studies' ;(37) that is, the spectator remains objective to the performance. The spectator observes how the political, economic, and social environment determines the characters actions and is shown "the means by which those onerous conditions could be done away with" (Steer, 1968, 641). Brecht explains that the actor too should demonstrate an appropriate emotional distance from the character they are playing so that they 'appear strange and even surprising to the audience' ("Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting", 92).

The Perpetuity of War

The play examines war not just as a capitalistic system but also on a domestic level. It is central to the emotional impact of the play that it is about a mother and her children. *Mother Courage's* treatment of (particularly) Katrin and Swiss Cheese emphasizes the difficulty of combining her role of "mother" with her professional role of "canteen woman." One of the play's key questions is whether her trading helps or hinders her family--it is the only way for them to survive, but it results in the deaths of all of her children. Significantly, whenever one of the children die, Brecht ensures that *Mother Courage* is distracted by business affairs.

War, in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, is not an abstraction or an environment. It is a voracious, implacable, almost palpable and inevitable force of destruction. There are no battle scenes in Bertolt Brecht's drama. Mother Courage, the dauntless marketer who aims to profit from the ruins of war, keeps her lumbering cart of junk merchandise on the fringes of the conflict, traveling endlessly through Europe in the wake of horror.

It also is interesting to examine Katrin's journey (as by far the most important of the children) through the play in light of how far her development, desires, and growing sexuality are repressed and damaged by the fact that her mother is a wartime canteen woman.

In the first scene, there is a grotesque description of how the citizens of the world rely on war to hold civilization together. An audience member might be forgiven for dismissing it as an opening joke. Yet, the idea of war as order, "peace as war undeclared," as the Chaplain has it--recurs throughout, and the Chaplain believably expresses very similar sentiments at various points in the play. Threatening the Sergeant with a knife, the latter feels offended, and thus retorts:

Sergeant: Peaceable I Don't think; look at your knife. You should be ashamed of yourself; put that knife away, you old harridan. A minute back you were admitting you live off the war, how else should you live, what from? But how's anyone to have war without soldiers? (Scene 1)

Mother Courage herself is an emblem of the way the play's society seems to depend upon the perpetuity of war and, for the brief time while peace is declared, peace is often described as a disaster rather than the end of a devastating war. Is war actually the axis on which the society of the play turns? Is the nature of man antagonistic rather than cooperative? The war goes on endlessly. It seems there are many people like Mother Courage whose lives depend on wars; the song sung in the last scene is the manifestation of such endless wars:

With all its luck and all its dangers
The war is dragged on a bit
Another hundred years or longer
The Common man won't benefit.
Filthy his food, no soap to shave him:
The regiment steals half his pay
But still a miracle may save him:
Tomorrow is another day!
The new year's come. The watchmen shout.
The thaw sets in. The dead remain.
Wherever life has not died out
It staggers to its feet again. (Scene 12)

Social and economic meaning intrude upon Courage's moment of grief, preventing the spectator from losing their objectivity in empathy for the grieving mother. The action shows that even motherhood is "embedded in economics": she is 'a good businesswoman' despite her grief. (Smith, 1991, p. 493)

Gestus

One of the most difficult terms in the Brechtian vocabulary is *gestus*. At its most superficial, this is close to the English word 'gesture': the pointed finger, the shrugged shoulder, the turned back and so on. However, *gestus* also refers to something deeper: the physical embodiment of the relationships between people in society. Each *gestus* provides the audience with an attitude towards the society that is portrayed.

The way that Mother Courage, all alone, hauls the cart round the stage for the last time, still looking for business, is a very particular *gestus*: a poor production of the play would make this image as pathetic as

possible; Brecht's by contrast, expressed a very troubling *gestus*, which showed a woman determined to continue living off the war, even though it had robbed her of everything. She is not to be pitied. It is not natural for an individual like Mother Courage to want to live off the war.

Mother Courage and Her Children, not a Morality Play

As the name of its eponymous heroine suggests, Mother Courage poses the tradition of the morality play as its backdrop. Pedagogical in its intent, the morality play is conventionally organized around Everyman as its protagonist and various characters personifying Vices and Virtues. Action consists of their struggle, whether for the Everyman's soul or otherwise. Similarly Mother Courage offers Courage and her children as sense personifications the virtues that do them in during the war; these virtues include: wisdom, bravery, honesty, and kindness.

Despite these similarities, it is clear that Brecht fundamentally departs from the morality play tradition as well. Certainly Courage - explicitly located in her particular socio-historical context as well as the context of the performance - is no Everyman. Moreover, the epic form militates precisely against a structure of ready identification between spectator and character that the universal Everyman clearly establishes. In the morality play, Everyman represents us all. Also, Brecht's play distorts the one-to-one correspondences (e.g. Kattrin is kindness) the morality play poses, exploiting the dissonances and arbitrary relations between the terms of its allegories.

Although Brecht has used the form of allegory, as in Everyman, but his play cannot be considered a moral play. Mother Courage cannot achieve salvation the way Everyman does; the former is trapped in the worldly business and does not admit to this fallacy. She keeps on waiting for other wars to perpetuate. This notion of war is justifiable in Brecht's play, because an important issue in the epic theatre is its insistence on the suffering of mankind caused by war and politics.

Mother Courage and Maternity

Against Mother Courage - a mother who fails to protect her children - the play places Kattrin. Her kindness involves an impulse to mother in opposition to her mother's cold-hearted business sense. If Courage's war spoils consist of the loot she can scavenge, Kattrin's are the children she saves. Notably, her heroic intervention – one that breaks her stony silence, brings about the salvation of children. .

5. CONCLUSION

In concluding, it can be summarized that Bertolt Brecht achieved a great success as a pioneer of Epic Theatre and in order to make this perfect he introduced various features of the modern theatre. These features are just like the pillars of the drama which strengthen the form. Brecht did not consider himself committed to the traditional well- made plays created by his predecessors like Shakespeare, Ibsen, or Wilde. He was determined to take a step further, creating plays which deconstruct the traditional taboos or restrictions imposed on his own contemporary society. Thus he decided to reconsider the structure of traditional plays and innovate his own theoretical conventions. These changed can be observed in his depiction of plot, themes, and even characters. Such an attempt by Brecht leads to the alienation of the characters, and the inability of the audience to participate in the performance and to identify himself or herself with the characters. Brecht introduced the concept of “distance” in his plays, Mother Courage in particular.

Brecht defied Aristotelian concept of “tragedy” and “tragic hero” to show the new modern attitude of man towards life and the contemporary world. This defiance is not limited to tragedy, but covers such themes like perpetuation of war, misuse of honesty, and other shortcomings of mankind in the modern world.

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