

Topic Exploration Pack

Practitioners: Brecht

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This Topic Exploration Pack supports OCR A Level Drama and Theatre.

Introduction

Bertolt Brecht was born into a middle-class family in Augsburg, Germany, at a time when the world was full of conflict and contradictions. The First World War broke out when he was just 16, heralding the beginning of a life of political, financial and personal instability for Brecht.

In a world of such turmoil and uncertainty it is no surprise that change should happen in all areas of life, including the theatre. Brecht's passionate belief that theatre should not only reflect the world but, more importantly, change it, was the most important theme of his work. In direct contradiction to the popular genre of Naturalism, Brecht used his theories of Epic Theatre to achieve change and create the type of theatre he felt could make a difference.

Brecht's drama owes much to a wide range of theatrical conventions: Elizabethan, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Greek idea of Chorus, Austrian and Bavarian folk-plays, techniques of clowns and fairground entertainers.

His work can be considered in three stages:

The Early Period – The plays are humorous, in a rather bleak and cynical way, and present social and political questions, attacking bourgeois values. The plays are innovative, rejecting the convention of the fourth wall, stories are improbable, settings are exotic and songs serve as a commentary on the action. An example is *Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera)*, which was intended to ridicule the traditional sentimental musical.

Lehrstücke – The Lehrstücke are short, parabolic pieces written between 1928 and 1930. These plays were experimental pieces, written with a number of collaborators including Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Elisabeth Hauptmann. There are also three longer propaganda plays, one of these being *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe (Saint Joan of the Slaughterhouses)*. This parodies Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe. It contains many devices later labelled as part of Epic Theatre, such as a loudspeaker announcing political events of the time or projection of captions commenting on the drama. The intention in writing these plays was not necessarily to culminate in a finished, final product. The performances synthesised audience and performers, opening up a new realm of possibilities for action and choice within the framework of the play. In focusing not on one final product, but rather on the process of artistic development as in a rehearsal, the Lehrstücke aimed to bring about a kind of self-realisation in those taking part.

The plays of **Brecht's maturity** – Brecht's output was huge in this period but four of the later plays stand out:

- Mutter Courage und Ihre Kinder (Mother Courage and her Children; first performed 1941).
- Leben des Galilei (Life of Galileo, 1943).
- Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan (The Good Person of Sezuan, 1943).
- Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis (The Caucasian Chalk Circle, performed in English, 1947; in German, not until 1954).

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

In the first two we see episodic narrative theatre; each scene prefaced by a caption indicating what happens (in performance, these could be displayed or read out). In *The Good Person of Sezuán*, scenes presenting the action are followed by interludes in which actors stand back from their roles and comment on the actions of the characters. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a play within the play is used: in order to resolve the conflict of two groups of peasants who wish to farm a valley, a play is presented by singer, musicians and actors. The singer and musicians stand outside the drama and provide both narrative and commentary.

Brecht continued to develop his idea of Epic Theatre throughout his life-time, finally establishing the style in the 1940's and 1950's through his last plays at the Berliner Ensemble. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Epic Theatre is the *Verfremdungseffekt* or 'distancing' – more than anything else the 'V' effect defines Epic Theatre.

Brecht wanted his audience to remain intellectually and critically involved in the theatre. He rejected the notion of catharsis and the actor's attempts to 'become' the character he was playing. Dramatic theatre was dismissed as 'a theatre of illusion' – sucking the spectator into a dream world where all the problems were carefully resolved at the end of the play. Rather than leave those problems at the theatre, Brecht felt the audience should be spurred on to instigate change, to leave the theatre debating and critically reflecting on what they had just seen. The 'V' effect allowed Brecht to expose his audience to the mechanics of the theatre, drawing their attention to the mechanism of acting.

Brecht's theory never arrived at a fixed and final view. His ideas changed, developed, mellowed - especially because of practice in real works on stage. Much of his theory was explanation after the writing of the plays - not the basis on which these were written.

As both a practising dramatist and visionary theorist, Brecht changed the face of modern theatre. In Britain, Brecht's Berliner Ensemble's visit in 1956 had a profound influence on the newly founded English Stage Company at the Royal Court, and the realisation of what a permanent company could achieve shaped the creation of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1960 and the National Theatre in 1963. Directors, designers and dramatists were all influenced by Brecht's idea of an Epic Theatre and it left its stamp on a huge range of plays in the following centuries such as *Luther* by John Osborne and *Destiny* by David Edgar. His own plays were performed widely in both professional and amateur productions. The Brechtian influence can still be seen in some of the major plays on public themes that have emerged in this century; they may not follow his visual approach but they engage with the issues of our times in a way he would have understood. In *Enron* (2009), Lucy Prebble traced the fall of the Texan energy giant to show how Capitalism depends on con-tricks and illusions and in the 2013 play *Chimerica*, Lucy Kirkwood boldly invites us to compare and contrast China and America.

Resources

The following are resources that will offer you additional information to assist you in teaching your students about Brecht:

[The Complete Brecht Toolkit book](#)

[The Threepenny Opera](#)

[Mother Courage and her Children](#)

[National Theatre's Introduction to Brechtian Theatre](#)

Activity 1 – Brecht and politics

Display the quotes ([Resource 1](#)) around the room and allow the students time to read and absorb them. Ask them to share their ideas about what they think Brecht's philosophy and his purpose with regards to creating theatre were. Correct any misconceptions and build on students' answers to ensure they have a full understanding of his overall intention. Particularly draw upon answers that relate to the idea of wanting to bring about change and give some brief information about Brecht's background and what his reasons for this might have been.

Introduce the importance of Brecht's political views and Marxism. If time allows you may wish your students to do their own research on this and present their findings to each other. See [Resource 2](#) for a sheet that can be used to help discuss the basics of Marxism and how this links to what Brecht was trying to achieve.

Have a discussion about what is meant by the terms left and right wing.

Extreme left wing is Communism and Marxism. Essentially they believe that we are all equal, the world belongs to all of us, and we are all responsible for everything and everybody. Land, money and resources should be made and shared between everyone. Discuss George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, *Old China* and *Russia*.

Extreme right wing is Fascism. Essentially they believe there is a hierarchy in society and the strongest profit and the weak fall away. Those that own land and have money deserve it and the working man is there to provide profits for the rich. We all have a position in life, and we have access to certain resources/privileges depending on our position in society.

Introduce the Political Line Continuum. On the floor place three pieces of paper; saying left, right and centre. Ask for a volunteer to stand somewhere on the line where they think Hitler would be, then where they think Karl Marx would be (at each end). Then work through the following examples asking people to stand where they think they would be on the political line:

- Labour Party – half way towards left.
- Conservative Party – half way towards right.
- Liberals – centre.

You can then work through other examples such as Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher, the idea of a National Health Service/Comprehensive Education, themselves, West End theatre, Brecht.

Knowing Brecht is a left wing thinker, students can already begin to understand the themes/issues he will explore, the institutions he will ridicule and the people he will parody.

In small groups students should create images to represent the following: Left Wing, Right Wing, Dictator, Oppressor and Oppressed, Brecht's theatre.

Activity 2 – Epic Theatre

Talk to the students about the type of theatre that was around at the time when Brecht began writing plays: Melodrama, Naturalism and Realism. Based on what they have already learnt about Brecht's philosophy and political views ask them to discuss why he would be opposed to this type of theatre. What do they think the purpose of naturalistic theatre is?

Introduce the students to 'Epic Theatre'. In naturalistic or **dramatic theatre** the audience care about the lives of the characters onstage. They forget their own lives for a while and escape into the lives of others. When an audience connects with a character's feelings and feels an emotional link with what is happening to them, this is called catharsis.

Brecht was against cathartic theatre. He believed that while the audience believed in the action onstage and became emotionally involved they lost the ability to think and to judge. He wanted his audiences to remain objective and distant from emotional involvement so that they could make considered and rational judgements about any social comment or issues in his work. To do this he used a range of theatrical devices or techniques so that the audience were reminded throughout that they were watching theatre; a presentation of life, **not** real life itself. He called this **Epic Theatre**. The act of distancing the audience from emotional involvement he called the *verfremdungseffekt*. It is often called 'V' effect for short.

Ask the students to find a space in the room. Instruct them to mime walking down a corridor towards a door, behind which is their worst nightmare, slowly opening the door and then freezing at the moment when they see what is behind it. Spotlight a couple of examples and ask those watching to comment on how it made them feel as an audience member. Pick up on comments about the build up of tension, wondering what was behind the door and empathising with the fear that this character felt.

Now ask the students to find a partner and to repeat the exercise with one partner miming whilst the other partner narrates what is happening in a way that dispels the tension and most importantly reveals what is behind the door before it is opened.

Get the partners to swap roles and now the person who is miming also becomes whatever is behind the door at the point when it is opened.

Finally get each student to create a placard (either by writing on paper or a mini whiteboard) that will be held up at a point of their choice during the scene. Explain to the students that it is important that what is written on the placard gives the audience some new information rather than just commenting on what is happening in the scene.

Get a couple of the pairs to show their completed performance. Ask those watching to comment on the difference for them as an audience member, in comparison to the initial mime sequences they watched.

Tell the students that narration, multi-roling and placards – the 3 techniques that they have just implemented – were techniques used by Brecht as part of the 'V' effect. Hand out the list of Epic Theatre techniques ([Resource 3](#)) and either talk through them as a class or ask the students in small groups to create their own mini Epic Theatre performance, using any of the techniques that they wish.

Activity 3 – Gestus

Ask the students to get in to pairs and stand at opposite sides of the room. Label one row of students A and the other B. Partner As are to think of a nursery rhyme, then on a cue from you, all to say their nursery rhyme to their partner at the same time. See how many partners have managed to work out what the nursery rhyme was. Now get partner Bs to think of a nursery rhyme and this time to use gestures to get this across to their partner. Compare how many partners have managed to work out the nursery rhyme this time.

Introduce the students to 'Gestus'. It can be described as a gesture with a social comment. It is a clear character gesture or movement used by the actor that captures a moment or attitude rather than delving into emotion. For Brecht every gesture was important, with his actors he studied photographs of the plays in rehearsal to ensure each moment worked effectively. Could the audience tell by the actor's gestures alone what was happening in the scene?

Brecht didn't want the actors to be the character onstage, just to represent a type of person. For example, the boss who is corrupt and smoking a fat cigar as his workers starve is representative of every boss who profits through the exploitation of others. For this reason Brecht will often refer to his characters by archetypal names, such as 'The Soldier' or 'The Girl'.

The interpretation will be built on the character's social role and why they need to behave as they do, rather than looking inwardly at emotional motivation. So we judge the character and their situation, rather than just empathising with them.

For example, a soldier saluting as he marches across a stage might draw an audience's attention to him as a character. But if he was saluting as he marched over a stage strewn with dead bodies, it would be gestus as a social comment about the type of person he represents. An example from Brecht's own work is the strangeness of Mother Courage's silent scream in the face of her son's dead body. Therefore we think of why she must hide her feelings rather than losing ourselves in the emotion.

Ask students to create images to represent the following pairings: Romeo and Juliet, summer and winter, cat and mouse, sweet and sour, war and peace, rich and poor. Look at and analyse the last two, discussing how pairs have portrayed them. Is there a value judgment attached to them e.g. rich/war is bad - peace/poor is good? If so then gestus is being used. Each pair should now choose one of the pairings and create an image with an awareness of their use of gestus, signifying a meaning to their audience.

Finally present the students with the phrases:

"War – the maker of heroes"

"War – the taker of lives".

Ask them to create an image to represent each phrase with a transition between them both. Look at and analyse how the two images use gestus to convey different meanings.

You could link this to Brecht's work by discussing which of these two opinions the students think that Brecht is presenting in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. They could then create a tableau that sums up Brecht's opinion on war in this play and add a caption to the image – by finding an appropriate quote from the play.

Resource 1 – Brecht quotes

“The worst illiterate is the political illiterate, he doesn’t hear, doesn’t speak, nor participates in the political events. He doesn’t know the cost of life, the price of the bean, of the fish, of the flour, of the rent, of the shoes and of the medicine, all depends on political decisions. The political illiterate is so stupid that he is proud and swells his chest saying that he hates politics. The imbecile doesn’t know that, from his political ignorance is born the prostitute, the abandoned child, and the worst thieves of all, the bad politician, corrupted and flunky of the national and multinational companies.”

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”

“Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.”

“Don’t be afraid of death so much as an inadequate life.”

“Intelligence is not to make no mistakes, but quickly to see how to make them good.”

“All art forms are in the service of the greatest of all arts: the art of living.”

“Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the running to spread the truth among such persons.”

“People remain what they are even if their faces fall apart.”

“The theatre-goer in conventional dramatic theatre says: Yes, I've felt that way, too. That's the way I am. That's life. That's the way it will always be. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is no escape for him. That's great art - Everything is self-evident. I am made to cry with those who cry, and laugh with those who laugh. But the theatre-goer in the Epic Theatre says: I would never have thought that. You can't do that. That's very strange, practically unbelievable. That has to stop. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is an escape for him. That's great art - nothing is self-evident. I am made to laugh about those who cry, and cry about those who laugh.”

“We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”

“A man who strains himself on the stage is bound, if he is any good, to strain all the people sitting in the stalls.”

Resource 2 – Brecht and Marxism

Marxism

During the 19th century Karl Marx developed a belief of how he thought humanity, as a whole should exist – Marxism. Originally Marxism consisted of three interrelated ideas:

- Philosophical view of man
- Theory of history
- Economic and political program.

Today, however, Marxism can refer to the ideas behind the Soviet Government in Russia and beliefs of Communist or Socialist Parties in other countries. It can also provide the basic foundations for philosophical or social problems formed by some Western thinkers, including Brecht.

The philosophical side of Marxism states that the significant characteristic of human nature is creativity, or the exertion of labour on the produce of nature to satisfy the needs of humanity.

The individual labours for the species overall, not for own personal needs. Therefore everyone should put the work in and be able to reap the benefits equally.

However, this ideal situation has been prevented from happening by such interventions as Capitalism. Under Capitalism the bourgeoisie (the middle/upper classes) reap the benefits of the labour undertaken by the proletariat (working classes) in exchange for wages. Capitalism is run by money, not by the shared authority of the Marxist ideal.

The world created by the proletariat, therefore, does not belong to them, but to the bourgeoisie – a situation described as ‘alienation’ by Marx. He believed that the only way of destroying alienation would be for the proletariat to rise and repossess what is rightfully theirs.

In his theories, Marx brought together the class struggle of Capitalism and the ideal classless society of Marxism by ascertaining that class struggle would eventually prove to be the inevitable means in the sequence of events that would mutually unite the classless society.

The belief of Marxism is that the victory of the proletariat (THE WORKERS) over the bourgeoisie (THE UPPER CLASSES) will eventually heal the division that has split humanity and which has existed since the division of labour.

How Brecht used Marxism in his theories

In his theories Brecht was against:

- The fourth wall
- Anything that reinforces Capitalist thought
- Bourgeois theatre
- Plot
- Spectator sharing feeling of actors on stage.

In his creation of Epic Theatre, Brecht was rebelling against all of the constrictions of the bourgeoisie theatre, or dramatic theatre, as it was commonly known.

He shows his loathing of the Capitalist society through most of his plays, persuading the audience that only Marxism could truly rule in a just civilization.

Resource 3 – Epic Theatre techniques

Narration

Narration is used to remind the audience that what they're watching is a presentation of a story. Sometimes the narrator will tell us what happens in the story before it has happened. This is a good way of making sure that we don't become emotionally involved in the action to come as we already know the outcome.

Direct address

Speaking directly to the audience breaks the fourth wall and destroys any illusion of reality. An example would be the moment where Grusha pleads to save baby Michael in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*: "I brought him up, shall I also tear him to bits? I can't".

Coming out of role / third person narration

Commenting upon a character as an actor is a clear way of reminding the audience of theatricality.

Speaking the stage directions

This device was used by Brecht more frequently in rehearsal than performance. It helps distance the actor from the character they're playing. It also reminds the audience that they're watching a play and forces them to study the actions of a character in objective detail.

Multi-roling

Multi-roling is when an actor plays more than one character onstage. The differences in character are marked by changing voice, movement, gesture and body language but the audience can clearly see that the same actor has taken on more than one role. This means the audience are more aware of the fact that they are watching a presentation of events. Cross-sex casting is also possible in Epic Theatre as we don't need to suspend our disbelief.

Split-role

This is where more than one actor plays the same character. For instance, the actor playing the main character might rotate from scene to scene. This keeps that character representational and inhibits emotional involvement and attachment on the part of the audience.

Placards

A placard is a sign or additional piece of written information presented onstage. Using placards might be as simple as holding up a card or banner. Multimedia or a PowerPoint slideshow can also be used for this effect. The musical, *Miss Saigon*, for example, used a slideshow to demonstrate the loss of lives in the Vietnam War. What's important is that the information doesn't just comment upon the action but deepens our understanding of it.

For example, a married couple are arguing and the wife is very upset. If the actress held up a placard saying 'I'm miserable' that wouldn't tell us anything about the character that we didn't already know. However, if her placard said 'I'm having an affair' or 'I've never loved him' the audience would be forced to consider other aspects of their relationship and to think about deeper reasons behind her tears.

Minimal set, costume and props

Set, costume and props are all kept simple and representational. Elaborate costumes might mean that the sense of theatre, of pretending to be something else, was lost. Brecht did believe in historicism. Although the stage setting was usually minimal, there was always a sense of authenticity to production elements. For example, Mother Courage's cart in the National Theatre production is stocked full with realistic props that Mother Courage would need for authenticity. The cart is the fifth member of the family according to Brecht so there are examples of props being as important as characters in his plays.

Symbolic props

Often one item can be used in a variety of ways. A suitcase might become a desk, or a car door or a bomb.

Lighting

Brecht believed in keeping lighting simple as he didn't want the production values to overshadow the message of the work. He believed in using harsh white light as this illuminates the truth. However, many modern productions do use lighting effects. The important thing is that the audience still see the theatre, so often they will see production personnel, such as backstage crew, in action on the stage rather than hidden.

Song and dance

This is a good way to ensure that the audience sees the theatre and are reminded of the fact they are watching a play. Often in Brechtian theatre the style of the music and the lyrics jar, they don't seem to fit together in style; this distances the audience further.

It's worth listening to the song 'Mack the Knife' from *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht and Kurt Weill. Notice how the musical arrangement and melody are upbeat and joyous, yet the lyrics are sinister and dark. This is a very Brechtian approach. One of the most famous lines from this work would still appeal to a modern audience: Who is the bigger criminal: he who robs a bank or he who founds one?

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