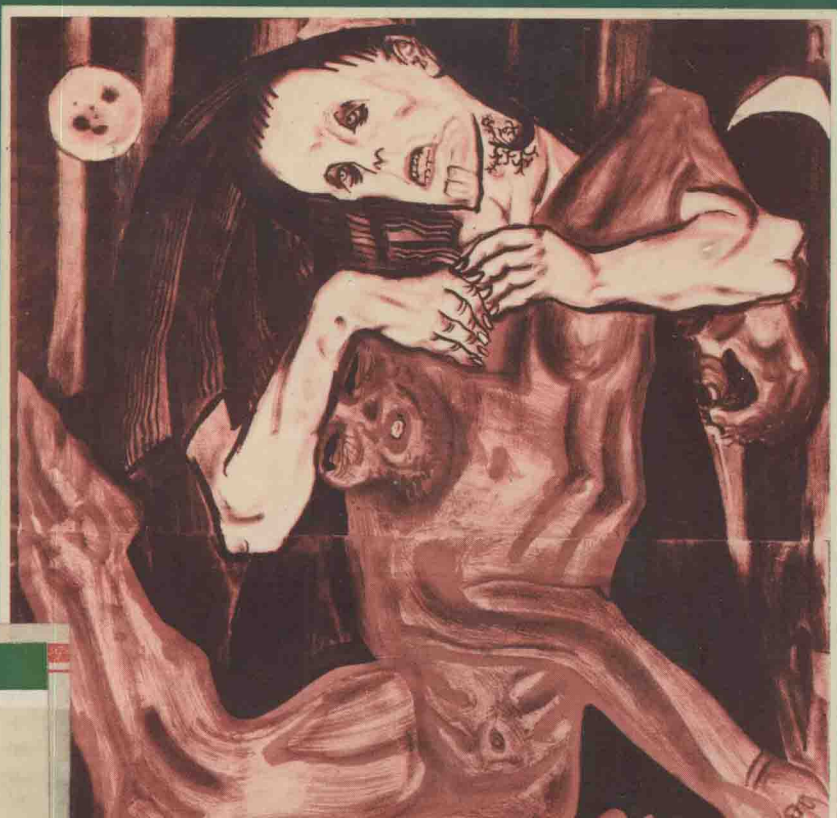


J.L. STYAN

Modern drama in theory and practice 3

Expressionism and
Epic Theatre



*Modern drama in theory
and practice*

VOLUME 3

Expressionism and epic theatre

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Preface

It is a principle increasingly accepted that the manner of playwriting is inseparable from the kind of theatre it is written for. The new attempt of this study is to look at some of the important plays of modern times, not as isolated literary works, but in relation to their production and performance. The intention is to trace some of the interactions between playwright and performing artist (this term to include all who are involved in production: actors and directors, lighting and scenic designers), and the subject of the study is, in the widest sense, the bearing of theory on practice, and of practice on theory. Like any art form, drama is sometimes aroused by fitful rebellion, but it always builds upon the testing of ideas on an audience and the total theatre experience of the past.

The story of the theatre is one of rebellion and reaction, with new forms challenging the old, and old forms in turn providing the basis for the new. But the labels we use, realism, symbolism, and so on, too easily blanket the details of dramatic and stage history. These details are not often found in the laws of playwriting or in the manifestoes of fashionable movements, but remain to be extracted from the day-to-day dealings of the stage. We must judge less by intentions than by results, aware that theory and practice are more often in conflict than in accord: in John Gassner's words, we must recognize 'the breach between ambition and attainment'. It is necessary to turn to the promptbook and the acting edition, the *Regiebuch* and the *Modellbuch*, to notices and criticism, interviews and memoirs, as well as to the text of the play itself, to know what happened.

To adapt a concept of the art historian, E. H. Gombrich, drama originates in our reactions to the world, and not in the world itself. By this argument, the changes which an audience perceives on the stage between, say, the grim naturalism of a *Lower Depths* and the violent fantasies of Edward Bond, are changes in itself. The abiding

secret of dramatic interpretation lies in its 'style', the *way of seeing* of writer, player or spectator, and style is the one ingredient, it must be supposed, which a play and its performance should ideally have in common, since it is the *sine qua non* of dramatic communication. Moreover, if an artist's perception of reality is conditioned by the age he lives in and by the medium he works with, an understanding of style will supply some of the clues to both. This study, therefore, concerned as it is with the limitations and possibilities of drama since Büchner and Wagner, Zola and Ibsen, may afford an insight into ourselves and our modes of perception.

The threads of many different styles, however, are interwoven within a single play in performance. This is especially true of this century, which can draw upon a multitude of conventions from the 'imaginary museum'. In practice, it is impossible to find a play of, say, naked realism or pure symbolism, and the best playwrights are constantly resourceful: Ibsen is a realist and a symbolist, Strindberg embraces both naturalism and expressionism, in writing a symbolist drama Pirandello becomes a progenitor of the absurd, Weiss arranges Artaudian cruelty within a Brechtian epic frame and so on. Theatre artists are similarly elastic: Meyerhold, the originator of constructivism, produced the outstanding *Inspector General*, Jouvet showed himself master of Molière as well as of *La Machine infernale*, Barrault produced a fine *Phèdre* and was also superbly sensitive to Chekhov.

A final explanation. In order to follow a clearer path through a jungle of detail, *Modern Drama* is presented as three extended essays on realism, symbolism and expressionism, with developments in the last two into surrealism, absurdism and epic theatre. Discussions focus upon those landmark productions of modern times in order to be as specific as possible. In one way, it may seem unfortunate that these essays appear separately, artificially dividing the total theatrical scene; yet, in tracing the several competing structures of signals and responses between stage and audience, it is remarkable what continuities are revealed. At all events, my hope is to provide another aid towards a properly stage-centred dramatic criticism, using performance equally with theory as the basis for a history of the stage.

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J. L. S.

Contents

The dates are usually those of the production

	List of illustrations	
	Acknowledgements	
	Preface	
1	Expressionism in the theatre	1
2	Forerunners of expressionism: Büchner <i>Danton's Death</i> (1902), <i>Woyzeck</i> (1913)	7
3	Forerunners of expressionism: Wedekind <i>Spring's Awakening</i> (1906), the <i>Lulu</i> plays (1898, 1905)	16
4	Forerunners of expressionism: Strindberg and the dream play <i>A Dream Play</i> (1902, prod. 1907), <i>The Ghost Sonata</i> (1907)	24
5	Early expressionism in Germany <i>The Beggar</i> (1917), <i>Murderer, the Hope of Women</i> (1916)	38
6	Expressionism in Germany: Kaiser and Toller <i>From Morn to Midnight</i> (1917), <i>Masses and Man</i> (1921)	47
7	New production styles in Germany: Reinhardt and others <i>The Miracle</i> (1911)	62
8	Expressionism in Soviet Russia: Meyerhold <i>The Inspector General</i> (1926)	75
9	Expressionism in Soviet Russia: writers and directors <i>The Life of Man</i> (1907), <i>Turandot</i> (1922)	89
10	Expressionism in America: O'Neill <i>The Experor Jones</i> (1920), <i>The Hairy Ape</i> (1922)	97
11	Expressionism in America: after O'Neill <i>The Adding Machine</i> (1923), <i>Death of a Salesman</i> (1949), <i>Camino Real</i> (1953)	111
12	Expressionism in Ireland: the later O'Casey <i>The Silver Tassie</i> (1928)	121
13	Epic theatre in Germany: Piscator and after <i>The Good Soldier Schweik</i> (1928)	128
14	Epic theatre in Germany: early Brecht <i>Baal</i> (1923), <i>A Man's a Man</i> (1926), <i>The Threepenny Opera</i> (1928)	139

15	Epic theatre in Germany: later Brecht <i>Galileo</i> (1942), <i>Mother Courage</i> (1941), <i>The Caucasian Chalk Circle</i> (1948)	150
16	Epic theatre in Germany after Brecht <i>The Visit</i> (1956), <i>Kaspar</i> (1968)	164
17	Documentary theatre after Piscator <i>War and Peace</i> (1955), <i>The Representative</i> (1963)	177
18	Epic theatre in Britain <i>Serjeant Musgrave's Dance</i> (1959), <i>The Woman</i> (1978)	184
19	Expressionist theatre: retrospectively	193
	Table of events in the theatre	195
	Bibliography	215
	Index	223

Illustrations

1. <i>The Cabinet of Dr Caligari</i> , Germany, 1919.	3
2. Wedekind, <i>Spring's Awakening</i> , 1891.	18
3. Wedekind, <i>Spring's Awakening</i> , 1891.	19
4. Wedekind, <i>Earth Spirit</i> , 1895.	21
5. Strindberg, <i>To Damascus</i> , 1900.	25
6. Strindberg, <i>A Dream Play</i> , 1902.	28
7. The Intima Teatern, Stockholm, 1907.	30
8. Strindberg, <i>The Ghost Sonata</i> , 1907.	33
9. Strindberg, <i>The Ghost Sonata</i> , 1907.	34
10. Herwarth Walden, ed., <i>Der Sturm (The Storm)</i> , 14 July 1910.	43
11. Kokoschka, <i>Murderer, the Hope of Women</i> , 1907. Poster by the playwright.	44
12. Kaiser, <i>From Morn to Midnight</i> , 1916.	49
13. Kaiser, <i>From Morn to Midnight</i> , 1916.	50
14. Kaiser, <i>Gas II</i> , 1920.	52
15. Toller, <i>The Transformation</i> , 1919.	55
16. Toller, <i>Masses and Man</i> , 1921.	59
17. Toller, <i>Masses and Man</i> , 1921.	60
18. Sophocles, <i>Oedipus Rex</i> , 1912. Reinhardt's production.	65
19. The Grosses Schauspielhaus, 1919.	68
20. Shakespeare, <i>Richard III</i> , 1922. Jessner's production.	74
21. Crommelynck, <i>The Magnanimous Cuckold</i> , 1920.	84
22. Gozzi, <i>Turandot</i> , 1922.	93
23. Gozzi, <i>Turandot</i> , 1922.	94
24. The Mayakovsky Theatre, Moscow, 1935.	96
25. The Wharf Theatre, Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1915.	98
26. O'Neill, <i>The Hairy Ape</i> , 1922.	105
27. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, <i>The Street</i> , 1913. Expressionist painting.	106
28. Rice, <i>The Adding Machine</i> , 1923.	113
29. Wilder, <i>Our Town</i> , 1938.	116
30. Williams, <i>Camino Real</i> , 1953.	119

31. O'Casey, <i>The Silver Tassie</i> , 1928.	122
32. Toller, <i>Hurrah, We Live!</i> , 1927.	132
33. Max Brod and Hans Reimann, <i>The Good Soldier Schweik</i> , 1928	133
34. <i>The Triadic Ballet</i> , 1923.	137
35. Brecht, <i>A Man's a Man</i> , 1926.	146
36. Brecht, <i>The Threepenny Opera</i> , 1928.	147
37. The Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, East Berlin, in 1954.	152
38. Brecht, <i>Mother Courage</i> , 1949.	158
39. Brecht, <i>Mother Courage</i> , 1949.	160
40. Dürrenmatt, <i>The Marriage of Mr Mississippi</i> , 1952.	167
41. Handke, <i>Kaspar</i> , 1968.	175
42. Handke, <i>Kaspar</i> , 1968.	176
43. The Living Newspaper, <i>One Third of a Nation</i> , 1938.	180
44. Arden, <i>Serjeant Musgrave's Dance</i> , 1959.	187
45. Arden, <i>The Happy Haven</i> , 1960.	189
46. Bond, <i>The Woman</i> , 1978.	191

1 *Expressionism in the theatre*

In the view of the art critic Herbert Read, expressionism is 'one of the basic modes of perceiving and representing the world around us'. Asked what he expected of expressionism in the theatre, the ordinary playgoer is likely to be vague. In realism, he might say, actors sit about on chairs and talk about the weather, but in expressionism they stand on them and shout about the world. The reason is not far to seek. Of all the dramatic modes of this century, none has proved more accommodating, but the one element common to all expressionistic plays is a rigorous anti-realism. Expressionism began as a form of windy neo-romanticism and grew to be a hard-headed, dialectical kind of realism. Certainly it is today associated, as it will be in this book, with more than the youthful German drama of the 1910s that gave it birth, and even current epic theatre has retained strong formal links with the very expressionism against which it rebelled. Today, the term is generally applied after the fact, and is often better defined by the play to which it is applied than by the critic who applies it. Nevertheless, in its basic techniques it has been an enduring thread of great strength and vitality in the story of modern drama, binding such giants as Strindberg and O'Neill, Brecht and O'Casey.

The term was first applied to painting. It was thought to have been coined by the French painter Julien-Auguste Hervé in 1901, but John Willett has since found it in use half-a-century before then. In the 1900s it was a useful word to distinguish early impressionist painting from the more energetic individualism of Van Gogh and Matisse, each of whom refused to render exactly what he saw, in order, Van Gogh said, 'to express himself with force'. Where the impressionist tried to paint external reality, the expressionist insisted on conveying his private experience, his inner idea or vision, of what he saw. The expressionist flatly rejected any realistic style as being

obvious imitation: he was not interested in objective reality, and he refused to be wedded to surface detail. Beyond this, expressionism in painting had no aesthetic philosophy as had naturalism and symbolism in literature. The new expressionist was defiantly subjective, imposing his own intense, and often eccentric, view of the world on what he painted. In the theatre, such subjectivity can keep an audience critically alert, but if it is too private, the reason may reject it entirely.

As so often, a useful general term is shared by other art forms. 'Expressionism' was soon applied to music, architecture, poetry (typically to imagistic, lyric verse — parts of Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' might stand as an example) and fiction (we may think of Joyce's *Ulysses* with its 'Nighttown' episode, or the nightmarish stories of Kafka), but it was especially at home with the drama. 'Impressionism' had been a suitable term to apply to the novel where it described a technique which conveyed the author's own selective sense of reality, but it could not be usefully applied to the more objective elements of drama. Now the stage had a term which could identify any play or production that departed from realism and showed life in a highly personal, idiosyncratic manner, the form of the play 'expressing' its content, and it was particularly applicable to the perfervid movement which gripped the German theatre in the 1910s and early 1920s.

Only afterwards were the characteristics of expressionism recognized in forerunners like Büchner, Strindberg and Wedekind, and these were claimed as the new masters. The style spread sporadically through Europe, appearing in the work of the brothers Čapek in Czechoslovakia, Lenormand in France and O'Casey in Ireland. In America, its enthusiastic adoption by O'Neill also encouraged experiments by Rice, Wilder, Williams and Miller. It resulted in a few outstanding German films, among them Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926); both of these films are worth seeing if only for the record of early expressionist styles they preserve. Through the greater skills of Kaiser and Toller, the movement became more disciplined, and it flourished anew with a radical variation in the plays of Bertolt Brecht, whose 'epic' manner in turn touched the quasi-absurdist drama of the Swiss playwrights Frisch and Dürrenmatt. The lively

conventions of expressionism have now become part of the stock upon which the contemporary dramatist can draw.

Ideologically, expressionism in the German theatre was at first a drama of protest, reacting against the pre-war authority of the family and community, the rigid lines of the social order and eventually the industrialization of society and the mechanization of life. It was a violent drama of youth against age, freedom against authority. Following Nietzsche, it glorified the individual and idealized the creative personality. On top of this, the advent of Freudian and Jungian psychology in the first quarter of the century constituted a challenge to the playwright to disclose and reproduce his secret and hidden states of mind. Then the impact of the First World War and its mass slaughter of men in the trenches began to undermine the personal and subjective content of the new expressionism, and hastened the introduction of a more sophisticated concern for man



1. *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, Germany, 1919. Film directed by Robert Wiene.

and society; at which point, expressionist drama assumed a politically radical and Marxist temper.

An early example of a play which in 1922 caused a furore in the expressionist theatre was Arnolt Bronnen's *Vatermord* (*Parricide*), which he had written as early as 1915. In this play, the new rebellion is expressed by having a young man make love to his mother and stab his father. Here was a crude dramatization of Freudian thinking, but, as the author explained, he was not attempting to write what could be *seen*, only what he *felt* — nothing objective, all subjective. Needless to say, that explanation in no way lessened the sensation intended and the shock taken. 'Man screams from the depths of his soul', wrote Hermann Bahr in *Expressionismus* (1916); 'the whole age becomes one single, piercing shriek. Art screams too, into the deep darkness, screams for help, for the spirit' (translated R. S. Furness). Thus in its early stages expressionist drama was a dramatization of the subconscious, a kind of scripted dream, with the consequent loss of character motivation and rational plot development of the well-made play. This loss, however, did not necessarily imply a surrealist formlessness: a play's true, inner unity could be supplied by the single vision of the dreamer himself.

Particular characteristics and techniques became associated with the early expressionist play:

1. *Its atmosphere* was often vividly dreamlike and nightmarish. This mood was aided by shadowy, unrealistic lighting and visual distortions in the set. A characteristic use of pause and silence, carefully placed in counterpoint with speech and held for an abnormal length of time, also contributed to the dream effect.

2. *Settings* avoided reproducing the detail of naturalistic drama, and created only those starkly simplified images the theme of the play called for. The décor was often made up of bizarre shapes and sensational colours.

3. *The plot and structure* of the play tended to be disjointed and broken into episodes, incidents and tableaux, each making a point of its own. Instead of the dramatic conflict of the well-made play, the emphasis was on a sequence of dramatic statements made by the dreamer, usually the author himself. From this structure grew Brecht's epic theatre, also a drama of episodes and demonstrations, although these were arranged to stimulate the intelligence of the

audience, and not to appeal to the emotions as in expressionist drama.

4. *Characters* lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations, like 'The Man', 'The Father', 'The Son', 'The Workman', 'The Engineer', and so on. Such characters were stereotypes and caricatures rather than individual personalities, and represented social groups rather than particular people. In their impersonality, they could appear grotesque and unreal, and the mask was reintroduced to the stage as a 'primary symbol' of the theatre: 'It is unchangeable, inescapable', wrote Yvan Goll; 'it is Fate.'

5. *The dialogue*, unlike conversation, was poetical, febrile, rhapsodic. At one time it might take the form of a long lyrical monologue, and at another, of staccato telegraphese — made up of phrases of one or two words or expletives. The lines made no attempt to obey the laws of Pirandello's 'spoken action', in which the words directed the actor's movement and gesture, but they tried instead to evoke sympathetic feeling directly.

6. *The style of acting* was a deliberate departure from the realism of Stanislavsky. Moreover, in avoiding the detail of human behaviour, a player might appear to be overacting, and adopting the broad, mechanical movements of a puppet. All of this lent a sense of burlesque to the image of life presented on the stage, a quality which was suitable for certain kinds of comedy, like Gogol's *The Inspector General*, but which had soon to be modified for more solemn material.

Paul Kornfeld (1889–1942), the Czech dramatist who later became Reinhardt's *dramaturg*, assumed the role of spokesman for the movement, and the 'Epilogue to the Actor' which in 1913 he appended to his play *Die Verführung (The Seduction)*, may be read as the manifesto of expressionist acting. Kornfeld coined the term 'Seelendrama', 'drama of the soul', believing that realistic character psychology was miserably earthbound, and that 'the soul pertained to Heaven'. The actor should therefore play accordingly:

Let him dare to stretch his arms out wide and with a sense of soaring speak as he has never spoken in life; let him not be an imitator or seek his models in a world alien to the actor. In short, let him not be ashamed of the fact that he is acting.

Let him not deny the theatre or try to feign reality (translated Joseph M. Bernstein).

A real human being was too complicated a creature, had too many memories, Kornfeld argued, to be able to 'externalize' himself; by contrast, the expressionist actor was free to pick out 'the essential attributes of reality', and to be 'nothing but a representative of thought, feeling or fate'.

The actor was not the only one to enjoy a new freedom from the restrictions of realism. Since so much of the subjective impulse behind an expressionist play was left unspoken and unseen, the director and his scenic and lighting designers were afforded opportunities for creative experiment they had not known in the production of realistic drama. A period of unusual flowering in the theatre arts followed in the 1920s, and the German theatre alone produced a unique generation of directors of international standing, among them Reinhardt, Jessner, Piscator, Feuchtwanger, as well as Brecht himself. The ingenuity of these men in turn encouraged an exceptional interchange between playwright and theatre artist in this period.

However, the movement in German expressionist drama as originally conceived died soon after it was born. So idealistic and sentimental a treatment of life could not long survive in a theatre which, since Goethe and Schiller, had traditionally played a serious social role. But certain external elements of expressionism lived on in the work of greater writers who acquired a more purposeful philosophy of the stage. With new discipline in the work of Reinhardt, Piscator and Brecht, the German theatre struggled to become an instrument for social change. Epic theatre, as we shall see, removed the emotional appeal of expressionism, and told a more sober story.

The reversal was felt in Brecht's first play, *Baal* (1918). Although this remained Dionysiac and to a degree poetic, it deliberately undercut the idea of the youthful poet as the martyr among materialists, and appeared to be a parody of Hanns Johst's play *Der Einsame* (*The Lonely One*), written only the year before on the romantic subject of the dissipated nineteenth-century writer Christian Dietrich Grabbe. Brecht's second play, *Trommeln in der Nacht* (*Drums in the Night*, 1922), went even further, and undermined the idealism of revolu-