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BRECHT IN PRACTICE

Theatre, Theory and Performance

David Barnett

B L O O M S B U R Y

Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance

David Barnett

Series Editors

Enoch Brater and Mark Taylor-Batty

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Introduction

(Re)Introducing Brecht

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is something of a rarity in the field of theatre studies: not only did he gain an international reputation as a playwright, he also developed new ways of understanding theatre and new ways of making theatre as a director. This book focuses on his work as a theorist and practitioner of theatre and aims to introduce students, practitioners and those interested in theatre in general to the principles and nuances of Brecht's thought and its implications for the practice of making theatre.

For all Brecht's familiarity, he still remains remarkably misunderstood. The adjective taken from his name, 'Brechtian', often appears in books and newspaper reviews, but tends to be used to pick out features of a play or production that are more generic than specific. In the following quotations, 'Brechtian' merely means revealing that spectators are made conscious of the fact that they are in a theatre:

Ramin Gray's Brechtian flourishes – getting members of the choir to read lines from a script down a microphone – might be an alienation too far.¹

In a Brechtian coup de théâtre, the director Richard Jones and designer Miriam Buether turn the lights on the audience, casting us as the town's burghers at a rancorous public meeting.²

While such features are certainly found in Brecht's theoretical and practical work, theatre history itself is littered with direct address to the audience and acknowledgement of the 'reality' of the theatre, from the Greeks, via the medieval, renaissance and restoration stages, to the anti-illusionist experiments of the last century. Instead of pioneering such effects, it is perhaps more sensible to locate

Brecht in this tradition. However, what is worth noting is that his purposes for exposing the reality of the theatre go unspoken in such references.

Michael Patterson observes a more commercial use of 'Brechtian' and asks, 'can one claim that Brecht's legacy is anything more than a matter of employing a more or less fashionable label to enhance theatre work ranging from performance art to agitprop?'³ Whether Brecht is indeed 'fashionable' any more is raised by Michael Billington, writing fifteen years after Patterson's essay. Billington contended in 2009 that, in some circles, "Brechtian" these days has come to mean "slow, ponderous, didactic".⁴

Yet while Brecht may be 'misunderstood' on paper, it is in the theatre itself where the most significant problems lie. In her study of Brecht in Britain, Margaret Eddershaw observes that by the 1970s 'Brecht has been appropriated. But the problem with appropriation [...] is that its very purpose is to pull sharp teeth and nullify political bite'.⁵ As I will show, especially in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, Brecht's approaches to stagecraft require effort and focus if they are to be effective. Yet in a predominantly commercial theatre system, like that in the UK, where rehearsal periods average four weeks, the time required to interrogate plays and their performance through Brecht's method is difficult to secure. As a result, productions of Brecht's plays often resemble those undertaken in the West Germany of the 1950s and 1960s, as discussed by John Rouse: 'nearly all stylistic elements of Brecht's theatre were adopted [...], yet 'the [...] theatre neatly separated Brecht's means from his ends'.⁶ That is, theatres can use techniques they understand to be 'Brechtian' without necessarily understanding where they come from or why they are being used.

This brief survey reveals that the term 'Brechtian', more often than not, can provide a misleading shorthand for ideas that are both specific and, as will be shown, complex. More importantly, in the examples given above, there is no mention of politics, despite the fact that

Brecht's theories and practices continually grapple with questions of representing the political on stage. If the Brechtian method is to have any meaning, it has to be understood as enabling a radical insight into the way society and its citizens work with a view to changing both of them. This may sound like the 'didacticism' Billington notes above, yet, as Chapter 1 will make clear, Brecht was not trying to teach lessons as such, but rather a new way of viewing the world and its workings. By pointing to instability and impermanence, Brecht wanted to show that the world *could* be changed. As such, Brecht's is a fundamentally political theatre because it asks audiences not to accept the status quo, but to appreciate that oppressive structures can be changed if the will for that exists.

It is worth examining the possible reasons why politics is so frequently lacking from references to the 'Brechtian':

- Brecht was a Marxist, and Marxism, in the wake of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, has in turn been disparaged and dismissed as an unworkable and unrealizably utopian set of ideas. If 'Brechtian' has become a synonym for 'Marxist', then such an association may anchor Brecht in a discredited politics that many believe to have become superfluous or redundant. (Conversely, a successful Brechtian production may well help to redeem Marxism's tenets, for some in the auditorium at least.) In addition, theatre promoters and producers may feel or fear that a connection with Marxism will actually put audiences off a production.
- The 'political' is often understood as concerning political parties, views and policies. It can harangue an audience and be presented in a ham-fisted way, that is, it can be partisan or propagandist. Brecht's understanding of politics in the theatre is, as will be shown in Chapter 1, quite different from and far more subtle than this.

- It is possible to argue that there has not been a 'proper' reception of Brecht's ideas and practices in the UK (and, by extension, the USA), one that connects his method of dramatic analysis with the stagecraft he developed. While his plays have certainly been performed extensively, directors have rarely engaged with his approach to theatre-making. Brecht liked to work with an ensemble to develop the actors' sensitivities to his method over time. It is more difficult to work through Brecht's processes in theatre systems in which there are few ensembles and short rehearsal periods. Thus, the 'political' aspects of Brecht's theories and stagecraft have rarely been palpable in the English-speaking theatre.
- Perhaps the most troubling reason for the refusal to connect Brecht with a particular politics is a wide-ranging de-politicization of Brecht, a phenomenon that has a long history. Only three years after Brecht's death, Martin Esslin wrote a book that attempted to split Brecht's art from his politics.⁷ Esslin's sentiments can still be felt decades afterwards, and are present in the following comment from Billington, for example: 'Brecht was a dramatist first and a Marxist second.'⁸ Both impulses (p)raise Brecht's art over his politics, and such a shift in emphasis has its consequences. Brecht's plays often end unhappily, for example. If, on the one hand, they are staged as examples of 'great art', they would then accurately and beautifully depict timeless human suffering. If, on the other, productions invite spectators to look on the events with a view to changing them, they would offer insights into the causes of the suffering and suggest that these causes can and should be remedied. Brecht's is a politically interventionist theatre: it encourages spectators to pick out contradictions in society and seek new ways of reconciling them.

This book aims to (re)introduce Brecht the theorist and practitioner to readers and proceeds from his political principles in order to uncover

the means he fashioned to achieve them. Brecht will be revealed not as a crude propagandist, but as a shrewd political theorist and practitioner. He continually strove to open up events on stage and expose the social forces acting upon individuals.

A running theme throughout the book is that of 'method over means'. By this I mean that Brecht's innovations for the stage (his 'means') are all products of the way Brecht thought about the world (his 'method'). If practitioners use the innovations without reference to the reasons why Brecht developed them, they will ignore the political starting point and offer performance that no longer provides insights into the workings of the world in favour of mere theatrical effects. Consequently, I will be arguing that what defines Brecht's contribution to theatre-making is his politicized method of approaching dramatic material. This is a key point of departure:

- Brecht's method has a politics: it interprets the world as unstable and consequently changeable. Such a position suggests that what we see on stage is in flux and that even the most awful situations or behaviour need not represent an eternal 'condition', but are subject to human influence.
- Brecht thus charges the theatre with finding suitable means for portraying the world, society and its people as provisional and impermanent.
- However, the means that may be used do not in themselves define the 'Brechtian': Brecht's contribution to theatre-making cannot be restricted to the innovations he introduced into theatre practice. They are a product of his method and are subject to change themselves.
- An emphasis on method also privileges form over content. It is not so much what but *how* something is represented. Brecht's theatre, when understood through the study of his writings and practice, is more concerned with offering interpreted,

contradictory material to an audience for its own deliberation.
The theatre is not a pulpit.

I will thus be exploring the different practices Brecht developed in the light of his political ideas; my aim is to set out his politicized positions on theatre-making. The analysis will demonstrate that Brecht as theorist and practitioner is neither outdated nor irrelevant, but waiting to be discovered.

Format and scope

The study examines Brecht in eight chapters. Broadly speaking, the chapters move from theory to practice, although, as readers will note, Brecht could use theory to inform practice and then re-theorize theatre in light of the practice. Theory does not, then, recede into the background as the book progresses, but continues to offer perspectives on the practices Brecht developed. Each chapter can stand alone, but refers readers to other chapters when ideas, terminology, definitions or practices are discussed in greater depth. The following summary surveys the scope of each chapter:

1. Revealing the Radical Theorist

Introduces the different roles theory played for Brecht and the central position of dialectics, the philosophical methodology he applied to politicize his theatre.

2. *Buying Brass* as Performative Thinking

Discusses how Brecht takes theory off the page and into the theatre, using performance as a way of engaging with and evaluating the ideas themselves.

3. Brecht and Difference

Locates the category of 'difference' at the heart of Brecht's theory and practice of theatre, and considers the many ways 'difference' can be felt in Brecht's work.

4. Method Trumps Means

Sets out Brecht's method for staging drama, and reiterates that the method defines the 'Brechtian', not the theatrical means Brecht employs to bring it onto the stage.

5. Brecht and the Actor

Extends the ideas of Chapter 4 by arguing that there is no Brechtian 'style' of acting, but an approach to performing based on the dialectical method.

6. Brecht and the Director

Explores Brecht's understanding of the redefined tasks of the director in a dialectical theatre, and the director's relationship with an ensemble in the rehearsal process.

7. Brecht, Documentation and the Art of Copying

Examines the special meaning Brecht applies to 'copying' in order to show how readers might set about making use of the ideas and practices of the previous chapters.

8. Brecht's Method in Action

Offers analysis of and suggestions for staging a play by Brecht (*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*) and a play by a dramatist not associated with the Brechtian tradition (*Closer* by Patrick Marber) as way of showing how Brecht's method can respond to different textual challenges.

An Epilogue closes the book. It considers Brecht's achievements in the theatre and asks how we might modify and extend some of Brecht's ideas in the light of recent developments in history and society.

Brecht's theories have been much read in English, ever since a representative collection was published as *Brecht on Theatre* in 1964. However, understanding what *Verfremdung* (sometimes translated as 'alienation'), *Gestus* and Brecht's ideas for acting mean in practice has proved more difficult to establish. The chapters present various practical examples of how Brecht worked as a director, and these