

Chapter 21

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)

One of the most (if not *the* most) important figures of theatrical theory, Bertolt (Eugene Berthold Fredrich) Brecht was a playwright, poet, and stage director. His well-known works, the musical *Threepenny Opera* (1929), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), *The Life of Galileo* (1939, 1947), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1945), have been reproduced throughout the world. His dramas include didactic-agitprop *Lehrstücke* (learning plays), historical dramas, and dramas of social criticism. His two important works on theory – *Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949) and the unfinished *Messingkauf Dialogues* (1956) – are elaborate expressions of his ideas. He was a vital force internationally during the pre-Nazi period in Weimar, and remained influential during his exile years (ca. 1933–48). During the early 1950s he was a leading figure of East Germany's Berliner Ensemble.

Brecht's theories, from the 1920s to his death in 1956, are an investigation of theatre's apparatus, political efficacy, and theatrical contours. He was a devoted Marxist, but unlike other leftists who turned to social realism (e.g., Lukács), Brecht found the social realistic form outdated. For him nineteenth-century realism inspired inertia rather than action. He believed that a new society needed a new theatre; what was to be gained if socialism perpetuated the status quo, even if it substituted proletarian characters from bourgeois artistic forms? He found the avant-garde equally unsatisfying, dismissing art for art's sake as puerile indulgence. For him expressionism was strident and symbolism apolitical. He wanted to cool down the overheated emotions of expressionism and the histrionics of Stanislavskian melodrama, while simultaneously rejecting the esotericism of the avant-garde. In lieu of a model to build from, Brecht advocated

Excerpts from Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" (1930), "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" (ca. 1936), and "Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting" (1936), tr. and ed. John Willett, in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957, 2000), 37–9, 69–78, and 91–9. Translation copyright © 1964, renewed 1992 by John Willett. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, LLC, and Methuen Publishing Ltd.

"epic" theatre. Epic theatre, a term he borrows from the director Edwin Piscator (1893–1966), is drama containing episodic scenes fashioned after Shakespeare, with each scene a kind of mini-play of its own. Brecht wanted to interrupt the Aristotelian narrative flow because in his view narrative stream-of-consciousness panders to emotions, takes for granted the causal chain of events, and dulls the capacity for audiences to act. He wanted spectators to reflect on the staged event, consider how it took shape in reality, and explore what can be done to change the course of the events. To achieve this end he required theatre artists to isolate or frame specific moments onstage and subject them to analysis.

Brecht was concerned with how a play is transmitted. The prevailing theory was that theatre should elicit empathy, a term first used in the mid-nineteenth century by German aestheticians. It meant "feeling into" (the German term is *Einfühlung*, and sympathy is *Mitfühlung*, feeling with). Empathy first appears in English as a psychological term in 1909. Brecht nullified empathy by estranging the audience, i.e., encouraging them to resist identifying with the protagonist. He wanted instead to stimulate awareness over identification. He called for audience detachment, saying, "If we observe sorrow on the stage and at the same time identify ourselves with it, then this simultaneous observing is a part of our observation. We are sorrowful, but at the same time we are people observing a sorrow – our own – almost as if it were detached from us, in other words like people who aren't sorrowful, because nobody else could observe it so detachedly. In this way we aren't wholly dissolved in sorrow; something solid still remains in us. Sorrow is hostile to thought; it stifles it; and thought is hostile to sorrow."¹

Brecht borrowed the concept of *Ostranenie* (making strange or defamiliarization) from Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky. Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Mikhail Bakhtin were structural literary scholars concerned with art's peculiarity and the way an object is represented. "The technique of art," Shklovsky wrote in 1933, "is to make the object 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*"² Inserting defamiliar elements into the narrative loosened the certainty of reality and the predictable causality; defamiliarization intends to break the logical coherence and encourage gaps in the audience's perception. Audiences accustomed to seeing things in a routine way are now exposed to the unfamiliar. This artistic device – estrangement – is intended to lead to the audience's questioning of the event and challenging its inevitability.

Brecht created his version of this technique, which he called *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as alienation effect, or A-effect, although *Verfremdung* actually means estrangement). "If empathy," Brecht says, "makes something ordinary of a special event, alienation [estrangement] makes something special of an ordinary one. The most hackneyed everyday incidents are stripped of their monotony when represented as quite special."³ The "effect" Brecht sought was meant to stir reflection; he wanted to untangle an incident in order to understand the way the ruling class shrouded and manipulated events for its benefit. Silviya Jestrovic carefully parses the distinction between *Ostranenie* and *Verfremdung*. The former provides a conceptual framework describing the process of making the familiar strange through childlike naïveté, and can apply to absurdism, surrealism, and the grotesque. It is meant to distend and distort the

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relationship of the signifier and the signified. The latter, for Brecht, "is tied to reality in order to provide historical and ideological grounding for the theatricalized material." Brecht's *Verfremdung*, Jestrovic maintains, "places the material in an artificial framework, and represents it from various angles, but keeps an undistorted, realistic image."⁴

Henri Arvon aptly compares the two Marxist views of theatre, one upheld by Lukács and the other by Brecht. Lukács, Arvon says, "who is seeking to bring about a rapprochement with the liberal bourgeoisie in order to make it an ally of the revolutionary proletariat in the fight against Fascism, describes Socialist Realism as a further development of the critical realism of the bourgeois writers of the nineteenth century." Brecht, by contrast, "is convinced that only a radical break with the decadent bourgeoisie will enable the proletariat to win the battle against Fascism, and therefore flatly condemns the whole of bourgeois literature."⁵ Brecht wanted audiences to observe the power dynamics of authority, how it imposed its will through illusion, empathy, and charm.

Brecht's epic theatre is by design disjunctive, deliberately lurching from one scene to another. It is meant to replicate the circus. He advocated a dissonance in music: notes should contrast the mood of a scene (as opposed to Wagner's effort to underscore a scene via leitmotif). He opposed Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), preferring to delineate the separate components of acting, directing, and set design rather than unifying them, and looked to Eastern theatricality for the formalism he desired. Brecht's overarching goal was to cut against the grain by employing what he called "gestus." This describes an actor's gesture that distills the social hierarchy of the haves and the have-nots.

Aristotle became Brecht's dialectical sounding board; he used Aristotelian theory to illuminate his differing ideas. Stanislavsky's effort to connect the feelings of the actor with the role was also used by Brecht to demonstrate differentiation. Asian theatre techniques that distanced the actor from the role were to be encouraged. They enabled the actor to "comment" on the actions of the character rather than accept them at face value. "A definite distance between the actor and the role had to be built into the manner of playing," he said. "The actor had to be able to criticize. In addition to the action of the character, another action had to be there so that selection and criticism were possible."⁶ The three essays here illustrate a few of Brecht's many ideas that were to become embedded in the fabric of modern theatre.

The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre (1930)

The modern theatre is the epic theatre. The following table shows certain changes of emphasis as between the dramatic and the epic theatre:⁷

DRAMATIC THEATRE

plot
 implicates the spectator in a stage
 situation
 wears down his capacity for action
 provides him with sensations

EPIC THEATRE

narrative
 turns the spectator into an observer,
 but
 arouses his capacity for action
 forces him to take decisions

experience
 the spectator is involved in something
 suggestion
 instinctive feelings are preserved
 the spectator is in the thick of it, shares
 the experience
 the human being is taken for granted

he is unalterable
 eyes on the finish
 one scene makes another
 growth
 linear development
 evolutionary determinism
 man as a fixed point
 thought determines being
 feeling

picture of the world
 he is made to face something
 argument
 brought into the point of recognition

the spectator stands outside, studies
 the human being is the object of the
 inquiry
 he is alterable and able to alter
 eyes on the course
 each scene for itself
 montage
 in curves
 jumps
 man as a process
 social being determines thought
 reason

When the epic theatre's methods begin to penetrate the opera the first result is a radical *separation of the elements*. The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production – which always brings up the question “which is the pretext for what?”: is the music the pretext for the events on the stage, or are these the pretext for the music? etc. – can simply be bypassed by radically separating the elements. So long as the expression “Gesamtkunstwerk” (or “integrated work of art”) means that the integration is a muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be “fused” together, the various elements will all be equally degraded, and each will act as a mere “feed” to the rest. The process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against. Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has got to be given up.

Words, music and setting must become more independent of one another.

(a) Music: For the music, the change of emphasis proved to be as follows:

DRAMATIC OPERA

The music dishes up
 music which heightens the text
 music which proclaims the text
 music which illustrates
 music which paints the psychological
 situation

EPIC OPERA

The music communicates
 music which sets forth the text
 music which takes the text for granted
 which takes up a position
 which gives the attitude

Music plays the chief part in our thesis.

(b) Text

We had to make something straightforward and instructive of our fun, if it was not to be irrational and nothing more. The form employed was that of the moral tableau. The tableau is performed by the characters in the play. The text had to be neither moralizing

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nor sentimental, but to put morals and sentimentality on view. Equally important was the spoken word and the written word (of the titles). Reading seems to encourage the audience to adopt the most natural attitude towards the work.

(c) Setting

Showing independent works of art as part of a theatrical performance is a new departure. Neher's projections adopt an attitude towards the events on the stage; as when the real glutton sits in front of the glutton whom Neher has drawn. In the same way the stage unreels the events that are fixed on the screen. These projections of Neher's are quite as much an independent component of the opera as are Weill's music and the text. They provide its visual aids.

Of course such innovations also demand a new attitude on the part of the audiences who frequent opera houses.

Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction (ca. 1936)

The Epic Theatre

Many people imagine that the term "epic theatre" is self-contradictory, as the epic and dramatic ways of narrating a story are held, following Aristotle, to be basically distinct. The difference between the two forms was never thought simply to lie in the fact that the one is performed by living beings while the other operates via the written word; epic works such as those of Homer and the medieval singers were at the same time theatrical performances, while dramas like Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred* are agreed to have been more effective as books. Thus even by Aristotle's definition the difference between the dramatic and epic forms was attributed to their different methods of construction, whose laws were dealt with by two different branches of esthetics. The method of construction depended on the different way of presenting the work to the public, sometimes via the stage, sometimes through a book; and independently of that there was the "dramatic element" in epic works and the "epic element" in dramatic. The bourgeois novel in the last century developed much that was "dramatic," by which was meant the strong centralization of the story, a momentum that drew the separate parts into a common relationship. A particular passion of utterance, a certain emphasis on the clash of forces are hallmarks of the "dramatic." The epic writer Döblin provided an excellent criterion when he said that with an epic work, as opposed to a dramatic, one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life.

This is no place to explain how the opposition of epic and dramatic lost its rigidity after having long been held to be irreconcilable. Let us just point out that the technical advances alone were enough to permit the stage to incorporate an element of narrative in its dramatic productions. The possibility of projections, the greater adaptability of the stage due to mechanization, the film, all completed the theatre's equipment, and did so at a point where the most important transactions between people could no longer be shown simply by personifying the motive forces or subjecting the characters to invisible metaphysical powers.

To make these transactions intelligible the environment in which the people lived had to be brought to bear in a big and "significant" way.

This environment had of course been shown in the existing drama, but only as seen from the central figure's point of view, and not as an independent element. It was defined by the hero's reactions to it. It was seen as a storm can be seen when one sees the ships on a sheet of water unfolding their sails, and the sails filling out. In the epic theatre it was to appear standing on its own.

The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on the stage – by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations, by figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear – but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems “the most obvious thing in the world” it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up.

What is “natural” must have the force of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different.

It was all a great change.

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

The Instructive Theatre

The stage began to be instructive.

Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses enlightened the spectator about facts unknown to him. Films showed a montage of events from all over the world. Projections added statistical material. And as the “background” came to the front of the stage so people's activity was subjected to criticism. Right and wrong courses of action were shown. People were shown who knew what they were doing, and others who did not. The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it. So we had philosophy, and we had instruction. And where was the amusement in all that? Were they sending us back to school, teaching us to read and write? Were we supposed to pass exams, work for diplomas?

Generally there is felt to oneself. The first may be used in epic theatre against the strenuous affair.

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Undoubtedly there is much to be learned from school, from our present conditions and to what end

It is really a commercial order to be resold. All that is learned virtually in secret, devalues himself as a man. Learning is very much limited, for instance, against the labour, which makes general among the concerns of those who have not much knowledge that it can lead.

Learning has a very different character. It cannot imagine any improvement for them. Whatever happens to them, they have to tell. There can't be all that is said. They have said their final word. They are discontented with conditions and want at all costs to find out more. Learning; these are the best of all peoples. Thus the pleasure in learning, there is such a thing as pleasure.

If there were not such amusement, it would unfit it for teaching.

Theatre remains theatre and theatre it will amuse.

But what has knowledge got to do with it? Not everything that is amusing is knowledge.

I have often been told, with regard to knowledge and science, if properly understood, that art and knowledge are twin sisters. It is a fearful truism, of course, but perfectly true. Art and science are inseparable. I have to admit that I have not seen the sciences. This may well arouse the question of seeing poets as unique and

Generally there is felt to be a very sharp distinction between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful, but only the second is pleasant. So we have to defend the epic theatre against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humorless, indeed strenuous affair.

Well: all that can be said is that the contrast between learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule; it is not one that has always been and must continue to be.

Undoubtedly there is much that is tedious about the kind of learning familiar to us from school, from our professional training, etc. But it must be remembered under what conditions and to what end that takes place.

It is really a commercial transaction. Knowledge is just a commodity. It is acquired in order to be resold. All those who have grown out of going to school have to do their learning virtually in secret, for anyone who admits that he still has something to learn devalues himself as a man whose knowledge is inadequate. Moreover the usefulness of learning is very much limited by factors outside the learner's control. There is unemployment, for instance, against which no knowledge can protect one. There is the division of labour, which makes generalized knowledge unnecessary and impossible. Learning is often among the concerns of those whom no amount of concern will get any forwarder. There is not much knowledge that leads to power, but plenty of knowledge to which only power can lead.

Learning has a very different function for different social strata. There are strata who cannot imagine any improvement in conditions: they find the conditions good enough for them. Whatever happens to oil they will benefit from it. And: they feel the years beginning to tell. There can't be all that many years more. What is the point of learning a lot now? They have said their final word: a grunt. But there are also strata "waiting their turn" who are discontented with conditions, have a vast interest in the practical side of learning, want at all costs to find out where they stand, and know that they are lost without learning; these are the best and keenest learners. Similar differences apply to countries and peoples. Thus the pleasure of learning depends on all sorts of things; but none the less there is such a thing as pleasurable learning, cheerful and militant learning.

If there were not such amusement to be had from learning the theatre's whole structure would unfit it for teaching.

Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse.

Theatre and Knowledge

But what has knowledge got to do with art? We know that knowledge can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre.

I have often been told, when pointing out the invaluable services that modern knowledge and science, if properly applied, can perform for art and specially for the theatre, that art and knowledge are two estimable but wholly distinct fields of human activity. This is a fearful truism, of course, and it is as well to agree quickly that, like most truisms, it is perfectly true. Art and science work in quite different ways: agreed. But, bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get along as an artist without the use of one or two sciences. This may well arouse serious doubts as to my artistic capacities. People are used to seeing poets as unique and slightly unnatural beings who reveal with a truly godlike

assurance things that other people can only recognize after much sweat and toil. It is naturally distasteful to have to admit that one does not belong to this select band. All the same, it must be admitted. It must at the same time be made clear that the scientific occupations just confessed to are not pardonable side interests, pursued on days off after a good week's work. We all know how Goethe was interested in natural history, Schiller in history: as a kind of hobby, it is charitable to assume. I have no wish promptly to accuse these two of having needed these sciences for their poetic activity; I am not trying to shelter behind them; but I must say that I do need the sciences. I have to admit, however, that I look askance at all sorts of people who I know do not operate on the level of scientific understanding: that is to say, who sing as the birds sing, or as people imagine the birds to sing. I don't mean by that I would reject a charming poem about the taste of fried fish or the delights of a boating party just because the writer had not studied gastronomy or navigation. But in my view the great and complicated things that go on in the world cannot be adequately recognized by people who do not use every possible aid to understanding.

Let us suppose that great passions or great events have to be shown which influence the fate of nations. The lust for power is nowadays held to be such a passion. Given that a poet "feels" this lust and wants to have someone strive for power, how is he to show the exceedingly complicated machinery within which the struggle for power nowadays takes place? If his hero is a politician, how do politics work? If he is a business man, how does business work? And yet there are writers who find business and politics nothing like so passionately interesting as the individual's lust for power. How are they to acquire the necessary knowledge? They are scarcely likely to learn enough by going round and keeping their eyes open, though even then it is more than they would get by just rolling their eyes in an exalted frenzy. The foundation of a paper like the *Völkischer Beobachter* or a business like Standard Oil is a pretty complicated affair, and such things cannot be conveyed just like that. One important field for the playwright is psychology. It is taken for granted that a poet, if not an ordinary man, must be able without further instruction to discover the motives that lead a man to commit murder; he must be able to give a picture of a murderer's mental state "from within himself." It is taken for granted that one only has to look inside oneself in such a case; and then there's always one's imagination. . . . There are various reasons why I can no longer surrender to this agreeable hope of getting a result quite so simply. I can no longer find in myself all those motives which the press or scientific reports show to have been observed in people. Like the average judge when pronouncing sentence, I cannot without further ado conjure up an adequate picture of a murderer's mental state. Modern psychology, from psychoanalysis to behaviorism, acquaints me with facts that lead me to judge the case quite differently, especially if I bear in mind the findings of sociology and do not overlook economics and history. You will say: but that's getting complicated. I have to answer that it is complicated. Even if you let yourself be convinced, and agree with me that a large slice of literature is exceedingly primitive, you may still ask with profound concern: won't an evening in such a theatre be a most alarming affair? The answer to that is: no.

Whatever knowledge is embodied in a piece of poetic writing has to be wholly transmuted into poetry. Its utilization fulfills the very pleasure that the poetic element provokes. If it does not at the same time fulfill that which is fulfilled by the scientific element, none the less in an age of great discoveries and inventions one must have a certain

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Is the Epic Theatre Some Kind of “Moral Institution?”

According to Friedrich Schiller the theatre is supposed to be a moral institution. In making this demand it hardly occurred to Schiller that by moralizing from the stage he might drive the audience out of the theatre. Audiences had no objection to moralizing in his day. It was only later that Friedrich Nietzsche attacked him by blowing a moral trumpet. To Nietzsche any concern with morality was a depressing affair; to Schiller it seemed thoroughly enjoyable. He knew of nothing that could give greater amusement and satisfaction than the propagation of ideas. The bourgeoisie was setting about forming the ideas of the nation.

Putting one's house in order, patting oneself on the back, submitting one's account, is something highly agreeable. But describing the collapse of one's house, having pains in the back, paying one's account, is indeed a depressing affair, and that was how Friedrich Nietzsche saw things a century later. He was poorly disposed towards morality, and thus towards the previous Friedrich too.

The epic theatre was likewise often objected to as moralizing too much. Yet in the epic theatre moral arguments only took second place. Its aim was less to moralize than to observe. That is to say it observed, and then the thick end of the wedge followed: the story's moral. Of course we cannot pretend that we started our observations out of a pure passion for observing and without any more practical motive, only to be completely staggered by their results. Undoubtedly there were some painful discrepancies in our environment, circumstances that were barely tolerable, and this not merely on account of moral considerations. It is not only moral considerations that make hunger, cold and oppression hard to bear. Similarly the object of our inquiries was not just to arouse moral objections to such circumstances (even though they could easily be felt – though not by all the audience alike; such objections were seldom for instance felt by those who profited by the circumstances in question) but to discover means for their elimination. We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in that of the victims. These truly are two distinct matters, for the victims are often told that they ought to be contented with their lot, for moral reasons. Moralists of this sort see man as existing for morality, not morality for man. At least it should be possible to gather from the above to what degree and in what sense the epic theatre is a moral institution.

Can Epic Theatre Be Played Anywhere?

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theatre. Its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity bring it close to the old Asiatic theatre. Didactic tendencies are to be found in the medieval mystery plays and the classical Spanish theatre, and also in the theatre of the Jesuits.

These theatrical forms corresponded to particular trends of their time, and vanished with them. Similarly the modern epic theatre is linked with certain trends. It cannot by any means be practiced universally. Most of the great nations today are not disposed to use the theatre for ventilating their problems. London, Paris, Tokyo, and Rome maintain

their theatres for quite different purposes. Up to now favorable circumstances for an epic and didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time. In Berlin Fascism put a very definite stop to the development of such a theatre.

It demands not only a certain technological level but a powerful movement in society which is interested to see vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution, and can defend this interest against every contrary trend.

The epic theatre is the broadest and most far-reaching attempt at large-scale modern theatre, and it has all those immense difficulties to overcome that always confront the vital forces in the sphere of politics, philosophy, science and art.

Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting (1936)

The following is intended to refer briefly to the use of the alienation effect in traditional Chinese acting. This method was most recently used in Germany for plays of a non-Aristotelian (not dependent on empathy) type as part of the attempts [*Versuche*] being made to evolve an epic theatre. The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious.

This effort to make the incidents represented appear strange to the public can be seen in a primitive form in the theatrical and pictorial displays at the old popular fairs. The way the clowns speak and the way the panoramas are painted both embody an act of alienation. The method of painting used to reproduce the picture of "Charles the Bold's flight after the Battle of Murten," as shown at many German fairs, is certainly mediocre; yet the act of alienation which is achieved here (not by the original) is in no wise due to the mediocrity of the copyist. The fleeing commander, his horse, his retinue and the landscape are all quite consciously painted in such a way as to create the impression of an abnormal event, an astonishing disaster. In spite of his inadequacy the painter succeeds brilliantly in bringing out the unexpected. Amazement guides his brush.

Traditional Chinese acting also knows the alienation effect, and applies it most subtly. It is well known that the Chinese theatre uses a lot of symbols. Thus a general will carry little pennants on his shoulder, corresponding to the number of regiments under his command. Poverty is shown by patching the silken costumes with irregular shapes of different colors, likewise silken, to indicate that they have been mended. Characters are distinguished by particular masks, i.e. simply by painting. Certain gestures of the two hands signify the forcible opening of a door, etc. The stage itself remains the same, but articles of furniture are carried in during the action. All this has long been known, and cannot very well be exported.

It is not all that simple to break with the habit of assimilating a work of art as a whole. But this has to be done if just one of a large number of effects is to be singled out and studied. The alienation effect is achieved in the Chinese theatre in the following way.

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place.

A whole elaborate European stage scenes are so arranged that the audience is unnecessary. The actors openly address the audience, just as if they were speaking to themselves. Thus if he is representing a character with its soft and strong growth, its rapidity, he looks at the audience as if to say: "I am using my own arms and legs, adducing them myself." An obvious glance at the floor, a slight nod, does not strike him as liable to be interpreted as (showing observation) from gesture. In the latter, since the body's attitude is an expression. At one moment the artist utters triumph. The artist has been achieved by the gest of the body.

The artist's object is to appear to be doing this by looking strangely at him. The audience has a touch of the amazing, the obvious and automatic. A young woman stands steering a non-existent boat. Now the current is swifter, and she is steering more easily. The boat is apparently historic, which everybody knows. Each incident is recorded in pictures; each bend in the river is known which particular bend in the river is the artist's attitude; it is this that the audience knows. The march to Budejovice in Pilsen is a three-day-and-night march to a completely historic point of view. In this instance, Napoleon's Russian campaign is an artful and artistic act of self-alienation. The character completely, i.e. to the audience, is remote from the events. Yet the audience identifies itself with the artist's attitude of observing or looking at the events.

The Chinese artist's performance means that the Chinese theatre does not portray incidents of utmost importance at those points where the character of the incident is of hair between his lips and the audience is about it. It is quite clearly so, even though an artistic one. The artist points to himself, and he points to the audience, or if not decorously, he signs certain particular ones a

A whole elaborate European stage technique, which helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audience can view them in the easiest way, is thereby made unnecessary. The actors openly choose those positions which will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were acrobats. A further means is that the artist observes himself. Thus if he is representing a cloud, perhaps, showing its unexpected appearance, its soft and strong growth, its rapid yet gradual transformation, he will occasionally look at the audience as if to say: isn't it just like that? At the same time he also observes his own arms and legs, adducing them, testing them and perhaps finally approving them. An obvious glance at the floor, so as to judge the space available to him for his act, does not strike him as liable to break the illusion. In this way the artist separates mime (showing observation) from gesture (showing a cloud), but without detracting from the latter, since the body's attitude is reflected in the face and is wholly responsible for its expression. At one moment the expression is of well-managed restraint; at another, of utter triumph. The artist has been using his countenance as a blank sheet, to be inscribed by the gest of the body.

The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic. A young woman, a fisherman's wife, is shown paddling a boat. She stands steering a non-existent boat with a paddle that barely reaches to her knees. Now the current is swifter, and she is finding it harder to keep her balance; now she is in a pool and paddling more easily. Right: that is how one manages a boat. But this journey in the boat is apparently historic, celebrated in many songs, an exceptional journey about which everybody knows. Each of this famous girl's movements has probably been recorded in pictures; each bend in the river was a well-known adventure story, it is even known which particular bend it was. This feeling on the audience's part is induced by the artist's attitude; it is this that makes the journey famous. The scene reminded us of the march to Budejovice in Piscator's production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Schweik's three-day-and-night march to a front which he oddly enough never gets to was seen from a completely historic point of view, as no less noteworthy a phenomenon than, for instance, Napoleon's Russian expedition of 1812. The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i.e. to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the events. Yet the spectator's empathy was not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on.

The Chinese artist's performance often strikes the Western actor as cold. That does not mean that the Chinese theatre rejects all representation of feelings. The performer portrays incidents of utmost passion, but without his delivery becoming heated. At those points where the character portrayed is deeply excited the performer takes a lock of hair between his lips and chews it. But this is like a ritual, there is nothing eruptive about it. It is quite clearly somebody else's repetition of the incident: a representation, even though an artistic one. The performer shows that this man is not in control of himself, and he points to the outward signs. And so lack of control is decorously expressed, or if not decorously, at any rate decorously for the stage. Among all the possible signs certain particular ones are picked out, with careful and visible consideration. Anger

is naturally different from sulkiness, hatred from distaste, love from liking; but the corresponding fluctuations of feeling are portrayed economically. The coldness comes from the actor's holding himself remote from the character portrayed, along the lines described. He is careful not to make its sensations into those of the spectator. Nobody gets raped by the individual he portrays; this individual is not the spectator himself but his neighbour.

The Western actor does all he can to bring his spectator into the closest proximity to the events and the character he has to portray. To this end he persuades him to identify himself with him (the actor) and uses every energy to convert himself as completely as possible into a different type, that of the character in question. If this complete conversion succeeds, then his art has been more or less expended. Once he has become the bank-clerk, doctor or general concerned, he will need no more art than any of these people need "in real life."

This complete conversion operation is extremely exhausting. Stanislavsky puts forward a series of means - a complete system - by which what he calls "creative mood" can repeatedly be manufactured afresh at every performance. For the actor cannot usually manage to feel for very long on end that he really is the other person; he soon gets exhausted and begins just to copy various superficialities of the other person's speech and hearing, whereupon the effect on the public drops off alarmingly. This is certainly due to the fact that the other person has been created by an "intuitive" and accordingly murky process which takes place in the subconscious. The subconscious is not at all responsive to guidance; it has as it were a bad memory.

These problems are unknown to the Chinese performer, for he rejects complete conversion. He limits himself from the start to simply quoting the character played. But with what art he does this! He only needs a minimum of illusion. What he has to show is worth seeing even for a man in his right mind. What Western actor of the old sort (apart from one or two comedians) could demonstrate the elements of his art like the Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang,⁸ without special lighting and wearing a dinner jacket in an ordinary room full of specialists? It would be like the magician at a fair giving away his tricks, so that nobody ever wanted to see the act again. He would just be showing how to disguise oneself; the hypnotism would vanish and all that would be left would be a few pounds of ill-blended imitation, a quickly-mixed product for selling in the dark to hurried customers. Of course no Western actor would stage such a demonstration. What about the sanctity of Art? The mysteries of metamorphosis? To the Westerner what matters is that his actions should be unconscious; otherwise they would be degraded. By comparison with Asiatic acting our own art still seems hopelessly parsonical. None the less it is becoming increasingly difficult for our actors to bring off the mystery of complete conversion; their subconscious's memory is getting weaker and weaker, and it is almost impossible to extract the truth from the uncensored intuitions of any member of our class society even when the man is a genius.

For the actor it is difficult and taxing to conjure up particular inner moods or emotions night after night; it is simpler to exhibit the outer signs which accompany these emotions and identify them. In this case, however, there is not the same automatic transfer of emotions to the spectator, the same emotional infection. The alienation effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed. On seeing worry the spectator may feel

a sensation of joy; on seeing signs of emotion we do not feel emotional transference directed towards himself with the emotion. On his voice rise, holding his breath, his head, the actor can easily occur. But it does occur if he has a white face, which he has put on a white make-up on them. On the character, then his terror at the rise to an alienation effect. On the thinking being; it demands a keen eye for what is social at work; but it is a higher

The alienation effect does nothing whatever to do with the A-effect absolutely depends on the actor checks the truth of his much concerned with in his "abilities," but can always be corrected. really speaks? is that how a people. He acts in such a way as to the audience and practically

The Chinese performer is not allowed to have to "come round." After a point. We are not disturbing the stage before us the procedure is changed around him as he performs. When Mei Lan-fang to me exclaimed with astonishment in front of us turned round indicating the real death of a real girl. Production, but for a Chinese production, but for a Chinese misfired.

It is not entirely easy to realize of technique: a conception of theatre as uncommonly precious of society as rigid and wrong-l applicable to a realistic and revolutionary the A-effect strike us as odd and

When one sees the Chinese estrangement which they produce achieving an A-effect among them must accept the fact that when a mystery he seems uninterested from the mysteries of nature (

a sensation of joy; on seeing anger, one of disgust. When we speak of exhibiting the outer signs of emotion we do not mean such an exhibition and such a choice of signs that the emotional transference does in fact take place because the actor has managed to infect himself with the emotions portrayed, by exhibiting the outer signs; thus, by letting his voice rise, holding his breath and tightening his neck muscles so that the blood shoots to his head, the actor can easily conjure up a rage. In such a case of course the effect does not occur. But it does occur if the actor at a particular point unexpectedly shows a completely white face, which he has produced mechanically by holding his face in his hands with some white make-up on them. If the actor at the same time displays an apparently composed character, then his terror at this point (as a result of this message, or that discovery) will give rise to an alienation effect. Acting like this is healthier and in our view less unworthy of a thinking being; it demands a considerable knowledge of humanity and worldly wisdom, and a keen eye for what is socially important. In this case too there is of course a creative process at work; but it is a higher one, because it is raised to the conscious level.

The alienation effect does not in any way demand an unnatural way of acting. It has nothing whatever to do with ordinary stylization. On the contrary, the achievement of an A-effect absolutely depends on lightness and naturalness of performance. But when the actor checks the truth of his performance (a necessary operation, which Stanislavsky is much concerned with in his system) he is not just thrown back on his "natural sensibilities," but can always be corrected by a comparison with reality (is that how an angry man really speaks? is that how an offended man sits down?) and so from outside, by other people. He acts in such a way that nearly every sentence could be followed by a verdict of the audience and practically every gesture is submitted for the public's approval.

The Chinese performer is in no trance. He can be interrupted at any moment. He won't have to "come round." After an interruption he will go on with his exposition from that point. We are not disturbing him at the "mystic moment of creation," when he steps on to the stage before us the process of creation is already over. He does not mind if the setting is changed around him as he plays. Busy hands quite openly pass him what he needs for his performance. When Mei Lang-fang was playing a death scene a spectator sitting next to me exclaimed with astonishment at one of his gestures. One or two people sitting in front of us turned round indignantly and *sshhh'd*. They behaved as if they were present at the real death of a real girl. Possibly their attitude would have been all right for a European production, but for a Chinese it was unspeakably ridiculous. In their case the A-effect had misfired.

It is not entirely easy to realize that the Chinese actor's A-effect is a transportable piece of technique: a conception that can be pried loose from the Chinese theatre. We see this theatre as uncommonly precious, its portrayal of human passions as schematized, its idea of society as rigid and wrong-headed; at first sight this superb art seems to offer nothing applicable to a realistic and revolutionary theatre. Against that, the motives and objects of the A-effect strike us as odd and suspicious.

When one sees the Chinese acting it is at first very hard to discount the feeling of estrangement which they produce in us as Europeans. One has to be able to imagine them achieving an A-effect among their Chinese spectators too. What is still harder is that one must accept the fact that when the Chinese performer conjures up an impression of mystery he seems uninterested in disclosing a mystery to us. He makes his own mystery from the mysteries of nature (especially human nature): he allows nobody to examine

how he produces the natural phenomenon, nor does nature allow him to understand as he produces it. We have here the artistic counterpart of a primitive technology, a rudimentary science. The Chinese performer gets his A-effect by association with magic. "How it's done" remains hidden; knowledge is a matter of knowing the tricks and is in the hands of a few men who guard it jealously and profit from their secrets. And yet there is already an attempt here to interfere with the course of nature; the capacity to do so leads to questioning; and the future explorer, with his anxiety to make nature's course intelligible, controllable and down-to-earth, will always start by adopting a standpoint from which it seems mysterious, incomprehensible and beyond control. He will take up the attitude of somebody wondering, will apply the A-effect. Nobody can be a mathematician who takes it for granted that "two and two makes four"; nor is anybody one who fails to understand it. The man who first looked with astonishment at a swinging lantern and instead of taking it for granted found it highly remarkable that it should swing, and swing in that particular way rather than any other, was brought close to understanding the phenomenon by this observation, and so to mastering it. Nor must it simply be exclaimed that the attitude here proposed is all right for science but not for art. Why shouldn't art try, by its *own* means of course, to further the great social task of mastering life?

In point of fact the only people who can profitably study a piece of technique like Chinese acting's A-effect are those who need such a technique for quite definite social purposes.

The experiments conducted by the modern German theatre led to a wholly independent development of the A-effect. So far Asiatic acting has exerted no influence.

The A-effect was achieved in the German epic theatre not only by the actor, but also by the music (choruses, songs) and the setting (placards, film etc.). It was principally designed to historicize the incidents portrayed. By this is meant the following:

The bourgeois theatre emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged "eternally human." Its story is arranged in such a way as to create "universal" situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every color. All its incidents are just one enormous cue, and this cue is followed by the "eternal" response: the inevitable, usual, natural, purely human response. An example: a black man falls in love in the same way as a white man: the story forces him to react with the same expression as the white man (in theory this formula works as well the other way round); and with that the sphere of art is attained. The cue can take account of what is special, different; the response is shared, there is no element of difference in it. This notion may allow that such a thing as history exists, but is none the less unhistorical. A few circumstances vary, the environments are altered, but Man remains unchanged. History applies to the environment, not to Man. The environment is remarkably unimportant, is treated simply as a pretext; it is a variable quantity and something remarkably inhuman; it exists in fact apart from Man, confronting him as a coherent whole, whereas he is a fixed quantity, eternally unchanged. The idea of man as a function of the environment and the environment as a function of man, i.e. the breaking up of environment into relationships between men, corresponds to a new way of thinking, the historical way. Rather than be sidetracked into the philosophy of history, let us give an example. Suppose the following is to be shown on the stage: a girl leaves home in order to take a job in a fair-sized city (Piscator's *American Tragedy*). For the bourgeois theatre this is an insignificant affair, clearly the beginning of a story; it is what one has to have been told in

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order to understand what comes after, or to be keyed up for. The actor's imagination will hardly be greatly fired by it. In a sense the incident is universal: girls take jobs (in the case in question one can be keyed up to see what in particular is going to happen to her). Only in one way is it particular: this girl goes away (if she had remained what comes after would not have happened). The fact that her family lets her go is not the object of the inquiry; it is understandable (the motives are understandable). But for the historicizing theatre everything is different. The theatre concentrates entirely on whatever in this perfectly everyday event is remarkable, particular and demanding inquiry. What! A family letting one of its members leave the nest to earn her future living independently and without help? Is she up to it? Will what she has learnt here as a member of the family help her to earn her living? Can't families keep a grip on their children any longer? Have they become (or remained) a burden? Is it like that with every family? Was it always like that? Is this the way of the world, something that can't be affected? The fruit falls off the tree when ripe: does this sentence apply here? Do children always make themselves independent? Did they do so in every age? If so, and if it's something biological, does it always happen in the same way, for the same reasons and with the same results? These are the questions (or a few of them) that the actors must answer if they want to show the incident as a unique, historical one: if they want to demonstrate a custom which leads to conclusions about the entire structure of a society at a particular (transient) time. But how is such an incident to be represented if its historic character is to be brought out? How can the confusion of our unfortunate epoch be striking? When the mother, in between warnings and moral injunctions, packs her daughter's case – a very small one – how is the following to be shown: So many injunctions and so few clothes? Moral injunctions for a lifetime and bread for five hours? How is the actress to speak the mother's sentence as she hands over such a very small case – "There, I guess that ought to do you" – in such a way that it is understood as a historic dictum? This can only be achieved if the A-effect is brought out. The actress must not make the sentence her own affair, she must hand it over to criticism, she must help us to understand its causes and protest. The effect can only be got by long training. In the New York Yiddish Theatre, a highly progressive theatre, I saw a play by S. Ornitz showing the rise of an East Side boy to be a big crooked attorney. The theatre could not perform the play. And yet there were scenes like this in it: the young attorney sits in the street outside his house giving cheap legal advice. A young woman arrives and complains that her leg has been hurt in a traffic accident. But the case has been bungled and her compensation has not yet been paid. In desperation she points to her leg and says: "It's started to heal up." Working without the A-effect, the theatre was unable to make use of this exceptional scene to show the horror of a bloody epoch. Few people in the audience noticed it; hardly anyone who reads it will remember that cry. The actress spoke the cry as if it were something perfectly natural. But is it exactly this – the fact that this poor creature finds such a complaint natural – that she should have reported to the public like a horrified messenger returning from the lowest of all hells. To that end she would of course have needed a special technique which would have allowed her to underline the historical aspect of a specific social condition. Only the A-effect makes this possible. Without it all she can do is to observe how she is not forced to go over entirely into the character on the stage.

In setting up new artistic principles and working out new methods of representation we must start with the compelling demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and the possibility of remodeling society loom ahead. All incidents between men must be noted,

and everything must be seen from a social point of view. Among other effects that a new theatre will need for its social criticism and its historical reporting of completed transformations is the A-effect.

Notes

- 1 B. Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogue*, tr. J. Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), 47.
- 2 V. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," tr. L. T. Lemon and M. J. Teis, in *Literary Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. A. Singer and A. Dunn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 225–6.
- 3 Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogue*, 76.
- 4 S. Jestrovic, *Theatre of Estrangement: Theatre, Practice, Ideology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 26, 40.
- 5 H. Arvon, *Marxist Aesthetics*, tr. H. Lane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 105.
- 6 B. Brecht, "Notes on Stanislavsky," *Tulane Drama Review* 9.2 (1964), 156.
- 7 This table does not show absolute antitheses but mere shifts of accent. In a communication of fact, for instance, we may choose whether to stress the element of emotional suggestion or that of plain rational argument.
- 8 Mei Lan-fang (1894–1961), Chinese actor, one of the first actors to introduce Eastern style to the West. Brecht observed his work in 1935. – Editor's note.

Eugen

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill
 realistic plays helped
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Three essays by Eugene O'Neill
 "Thoughts" (December 1932)