Brecht and experimental theatre

Bertolt Brecht called his theory of Realism ‘anti-Aristotelian’ where he rejects the entire Aristotelian emphasis on universality and unity of tragic action, identification of audience and hero in empathy producing a catharsis of emotion. Instead of smoothly interconnected plot and any sense of inevitability or universality, Brecht preferred that social injustice needed to be presented as if they were shockingly unnatural and totally surprising. He very definitely considered the price of bread, the lack of work, the declaration of war may easily be regarded as phenomena of nature than as the results of explosive human agency. To avoid lulling the audience into a state of passive acceptance reality must be shattered by the use of the alienation effect.

Experiment is still a continuous process in European theatre. The two distinct experiment in theatre can be separated the popular supposition of the basic end of theatre— entertainment and instruction. Naturally both the types of experiments therefore target at increased entertainment and instruction respectively. But Brecht feels that in the fast growing world theatre needs to consider a more progressive stupefying (incredible) aiming at its audience.

On Experimental Theatre

Eugen Bertolt Friedrich Brecht, a German and son of a Catholic father and protestant mother began writing when he was at school. He then became the co-founder of and co-editor of a school magazine The Harvest.  At sixteen he was writing for a local news paper and had written his first play The Bible. In and around 1917 he began his play *Baal*.

Brecht extensively studied Chinese, Japanese and Indian theatre and concentrated on Shakespeare. He got fascinated by Greek tragedy. Brecht very apply utilized the fruits of his studies of the diverse areas of interest.

In 1933 Brecht fled with his family moving around the world to escape Nazi rule. He with his wife Helene Weigel set up Berliner Ensemble with full support from the communist regime in East Berlin in 1948.

The early plays of Brecht show the playwrights experimental attempts with Darwinism and expressionism. Finally he developed a unique style of his own Aristotelian drama was what he most detested. This type of drama provokes the audience to identify themselves with the hero through producing feelings of pity and fear leading to an emotional catharsis. This enchantment and fascination, Brecht considers raises impediment in the natural flow of rational thinking and the capacity of conscientious judgment in the audience.

Bertolt Brecht wanted to destroy the very theatrical illusion that Aristotelian theatre resulted in being a socialist realist as well as a Marxist aesthetician, he tried to see the world from a standpoint that was exclusively that of the proletariat. His eccentricism was capitalized in his experimentation to combine the theory and practice in Marxist aesthetics.

**On Experimental Theatre:Synopsis of the text:**

Experiments in European theatre have done in two distinct lines. Such experiments have been classified by Brecht on the basis of the fundamental functions the practitioners keep in their minds while going through the experiments.

1. Experiment ii. Instruction

Hence the primary objective in any experiment is to increase the power to provide either entertainment or instruction through the theatre to the audience. Experiment in theatre, Brecht believes needs to the progressive in nature keeping pace with the fast changing men and manners in this ever changing world.

The reality behind: Brecht insists on distracting audience from the illusion of the dramatic theatre— which itself is a distraction from the reality. It should never be forgotten that the audience is a mass of tired and exhausted people. Though he enters the theatre as a fugitive, he is a customer to be taken care of, at the same time. Simultaneously theatre has to compete with other means of **entertainment or instruction** like the cinema. Brecht’s reception of the various theatrical experiments worldwide is quite optimistic. Such experiment he believes has enormously enlarged the scope, potential and ability of theatre at large.

\* pp. 159-160: Brecht exemplifies theatrical experiments in various countries.

Impact of experiments in theatre:

Machinery in theatre has acquired significant from experiment. But the general usage and practice of the findings of such experiments according to Brecht is not at all satisfactory. He tries to find out the reasons behind such a slow progress of technological progress in theatre—

1. hesitation on the part of the theatre practitioners
2. Forgery or imitation is conceived as a disgrace in art.

As a result the age old technology is still in use in theatre.

Another group of playwrights has been cited by Bertolt Brecht to exemplify various experiments in theatre aiming at the other end of theatre, namely instruction. Such experiments that include Ibsen, Chekhov and Bernard Shaw is an attempt to focus the social problems in theatre in an experimental way.

\* Example p. 161

Such experiments results in production of ‘revue’— short satirical dramatization on certain issues and are full of songs and dances. Though these were endowed with the social issues, Brecht feels, such an attempt was not profound enough. While citing examples that such experiments caused loss of traditional properties of theatre like plot, he believes that the same (reformation agenda) was made at times, at the cost of artistic efficacies of theatre.

Diverse kinds of experiment have resulted in Babylonian confusion of style, speech and movement:

1. Awkwardly dissimilar techniques adopted by the actors
2. Naturalistic mode of action has been replaced by fanciful acting

iii. Artistic speech such as the iambics is used as common speech where as the common place speech is uttered in music

1. Actors are made have peculiar movements (such as mime) as natural which in reality is accidental.

Experimental theatre with highest effect— negative or positive:

This phase has been described as the ‘turning point or crises’ by Brecht. Because he thinks at best it results in any of-

1. The increase in the power of entertainment with the development of the stage illusion
2. The increase in the power of instruction along with the fall of artistic taste. At many times experimental theatre turned a political theatre from which Brecht believes, it is necessary to come out.

The increase in the power of instruction: Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) was the forerunner of this attempt who picked up the recent issues like struggle for petroleum, the War, the Revolution, justice, race problems etc. Two technological usages of his experiments were- film, conveyor belt. The first was used as a co-player transforming the rigid backdrop of the stage, and the second was used to move the floor so that the epic scenes could roll past. Brecht counts the rise of the reactionary groups as one of the causes behind the failure of such a move since that was basically politically motivated.

How Piscator’s attempt to increase in the power of instruction resulted in the fall of artistic taste: Piscator’s technological application transformed the auditorium into an assembly hall, the theatre into a parliament, and the public into a legislative body. Public issues were artistically reproduced on stage where the audience was expected to come up with political decisions. His complex design to illustrate such a complicated mission required equally complicated a machinery. Brecht here mentions how Nollendorf Theatre once collapsed due to hanging of so huge a machinery from the dome. He feels that aesthetic aspects were sidelined in the political theatre of Piscator, “… the objective was of such significance and importance that all means seemed justified”. It interrupted the flow of the play.

The bourgeois aesthetic:

\* bourgeois : ‎Of or [relating](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/relating) to the [middle class](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/middle_class), their [presumed](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/presume) [overly](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/over) [conventional](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/conventional), [conservative](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/conservative), and [materialistic](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/materialistic) [values](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/value).

**Proletariat:**

Proletariat is the the poor landless freemen and working class. It included artisans and small tradesmen who had been gradually impoverished by the extension of [slavery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology). Diderot (**Denis Diderot** (French: [[dəni didʁo]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA_for_French); 5 October 1713 – 31 July 1784) was a French philosopher, [art critic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_critic), and writer. He was a prominent figure during the [Enlightenment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_the_Enlightenment) and is best known for serving as co-founder, chief editor, and contributor to the*[Encyclopédie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclop%C3%A9die)* along with [Jean le Rond d’Alembert](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_le_Rond_d%27Alembert)) and Lessing (**Gotthold Ephraim Lessing** (German: [[ˈlɛsɪŋ]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA_for_German); 22 January 1729 – 15 February 1781) was a German writer, philosopher, [dramatist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatist),[publicist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Publicist) and [art critic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_critic), and one of the most outstanding representatives of the [Enlightenment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment) era. )are the pioneers of bourgeois aesthetic that held that theatre aims at both entertainment and instruction. For, they are not contrastive, rather complementary to each other. Even Diderot believed that pure amusement devoid of instruction is empty.

The social bearing that Naturalism imposed on art in general, as part of its thrust of ‘intellectualization of the art’ according to Brecht paralyzed the aesthetic forces by sidelining fantasy, aesthetic sense and genuine poetry.

The Expressionism of the post-war period created a sense of solipsism (only self can be known), Theatre while attempting an answer to the social crisis appeared as a revolt against life. Though newer aspects of expression were gifted under Expressionism, it just failed to interpret the world as an object of human usage.

Two distinct schools have been resulted out of the two seemingly different objectives of drama. Holding that the enjoyment of learning is subject to social position and the artistic treat is subject to political attitude, Brecht is of the opinion that every new increase in the powers of instruction led to an immediate decrease in the powers of entertainment. The more the public… brought to realization. (p 167 1st para last part)

The problematic areas unveiled by the experimental theatre have unveiled newer range for theatre giving some added impetus to its social importance. But at the same time Brecht agrees that the Experimental theatre has led theatrical enterprise to such a position where any further social development of the verdict finding, social/ political experience must necessarily destroy the artistic experience. “A technical … enlightenment.” (p. 167 penultimate para)

Brecht comes out with his theory of realistic art:  p. 167 ultimate para: Coming strongly against the Constructivist stage and Suggestive art he remarks- “Of what profit… U?”One could not possibly have ended here, Brecht opines.

Brecht then comes up as a social realist and a Marxist aesthetician of his unique kind. Every single experiment in theatre must contain some higher social goal in it. A Constructivist experiment should be socially constructive- a false and childish representation of the world can never be the end of any experiment the way Suggestivist experiment can never project a mutilated or distorted image of the reality. In his word, an artificial substitute for actual experience cannot be supported. Being dissatisfied with the entire enterprise of Experimental theatre Brecht, with the feeling that “One could not possibly have ended here” then posits his idea of the Experimental Theatre.

Brecht develops his idea on the logic of fusing the two seemingly different ends of theatre. It aims at attaining social consciousness by developing a view of life through artistic means. The goal is to help the spectators understand the social surroundings and to help him control them rationally and emotionally.

What necessitates such a revolutionary attempt is that man today in this world is capable of only vague, inaccurate, impractical and ineffective reactions, because he is provided with a polluted source of knowledge. (p 168 past para)Man in no way is in a position to control the world. His source of knowledge fails to provide him the knowledge of human’s nature and human society in its totality. If this prevails then this ignorance will be a source of man’s unhappiness. (Niels Bohr, Einstein p169) It is for man’s ignorance and failure to understand the surrounding in a proper way that man very often mistakes the man made oppressions, exploitations, war etc as natural, universal and hence unavoidable. But the experiments that theatre has already experienced results in stimulation of emotions, a deceitful view of life and in place of logic, the audience is provided with flights of fancy, in place of argument he is provided with rhetoric. Had man been provided a practicable view of life, man could have been able to control the world and it would not have been spoiled by the man made pollutions such as the monstrous oppressions and exploitations on man.

The critique of Aristotelian theatre:

**Hamartia** is a personal error in a protagonist’s personality that brings about his tragic downfall in a tragedy

**Mimesis – HERO- ACTOR- AUDIENCE**

**Catharsis** (from Greek κάθαρσις katharsis meaning “purification” or “cleansing”) is the purification and purgation of emotions—especially pity and fear—through art or any extreme change in emotion that results in renewal and restoration.

The poet who enjoys the grant of his own legality works on the basis of his sympathetic understanding of the spectator. This understanding he transforms through the characters on the stage. Aristotle’s theory of mimesis, pity, fear, hamartia and catharsis is stated as an example. The actor imitates the hero. His acting being so suggestive and full of the power of conversion that the spectator imitates him in the role and thus possesses himself of the hero’s experience. Brecht’s thrust is, whether an experiment is possible without this sympathetic understanding. For, the spectator’s sympathetic understanding, his acceptance of the universality and inevitability of man’s fate create a hindrance in the way of mastering over nature and attempting to change it in an expected way. (Lear 172, 173)

SYMPATHY IS EMOTIONAL, NOT RATIONAL.

The spectator can only share the experience of the actor, he cannot discuss it. The social phenomena is accepted as eternal, natural, unchangeable, ahistorical which is not discussed (to treat dispassionately) (intellectual reception), rather be accepted with sympathetic understanding. Transplantation of the hero’s emotions on the spectaor needs to be stopped. And in this sympathetic understanding man is the variable and his surrounding constant!

Traditionally theatre is supposed to be capable of sweeping away, captivating, and impressing, uplifting, horrifying, moving, keeping in suspense, releasing, diverting, setting free, and transplanting the spectator from his own time through illusion. He goes to the theatre for the same.

How to get rid of the Arisotelian mess of Hamartia and Catharsis obtained through Pity and Fear- Brecth’s Thesis.-

“When one renounces hypnosis to what can one appeal?” p 174.

Brecht tries to posit his theory on the background of this defect in a treatment of theatre done through a systematic understanding. In a way this is an attempt to see as to what may replace traditional Aristotelian ideas of pity, fear and catharsis etc. It is associated with hypnosis, illusion, passivity, resigned-to-fate attitude. From such a world the spectator is to be ushered to his real world, he is not to be ‘kidnapped’ or ‘abducted’ to any world of art. At this context Brecht recalls the experiments of his group in Germany at the Theatre an Schiffbauerdamm. The fundamental principle of their experiment was ‘Alienation’ which was posited as the alternative of the ‘sympathetic understanding’ of the Aristotelian theatre.