Brecht’s epic theatre

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Abstract

“Theatre should be the ritual place of God of things as they are” Brecht 1920

Although Brecht’s epic theatre and its system is studied in many schools of theatrical scenic art, in most cases, they are misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations of this entirely school of specific scenic – drama knowledge. Often, Brecht was accused of his “red” line approach and aesthetic ideology of art, and so, his genius creativity has remained under-shadowed.

Not only his knowledge for drama and the art, but also, his study and knowledge for spectators is prominent as well. Moreover, Brecht considers this line of communication as the basis of scenic theatre-arts, because he is fully conscious that there is no theatre without spectator. But, ironically, the Brechtian epic theatre is mostly hitted by being alluded as a the theatre that is used as an instrument for “awareness-education” of mass-spectators, while, in its essence Brechtian theatre attempts to led the spectator towards his freedom. Judgment of (anti) socio-cultural values, political, religious, philosophic morals, etc., is a process that is referred to the freedom of thinking. The objective of the epic theatres is to offer the satisfaction by evaluating these (anti) values. And evaluation, does not rarely request transformation. Therefore, the transformation that is driven by Brechtian V-effect is not an ideological transformation, as is very often attributed to epic theatre, but it is immanence for critical stand and re-finding of values.

The Brecht Theater request to meet with other arts, but, also with knowledge of different scientific fields, it is also named the theatre of science.

Keywords: Epic theater, B. Brecht, V-effect, critical attitude, pleasure (satisfaction).

Introduction

Bertolt Brecht created and formulated several postulates, which in their entirety form a system. He was a “German poet, playwright and theatre reformer, one of the most prominent figures of theatre in twentieth century”. According to him, “theatre is a projection on stage of real or fictive events which present reciprocal relations between people; a projection which delivers pleasure …, the main role of the institution called theatre is offering pleasure” (Brecht, 1973, 45-46).

The pleasure, according to Brecht, may be spiritual and physical depending on the level of evolution of the theatre, respectively of society. With the change in pleasure, theatre changes too. This change, according to Brecht, is dialectic because human society has been evolving and transforming during history in aspects of civilization, philosophy and morality. Such a change necessarily determines changes in theatre, because “theatre should reflect the reality”, so that theatre accomplishes one of its functions: provoke the effect of pleasure to the recipient. In this context, the pleasure of Brechtian theatre intersects with catharsis.
of Aristotelian “theatre”, although catharsis is “purification of passions (pathemata)‖ through mercy (eleos) and fear (fobos). Nevertheless, the distinction between Brechtian pleasure and Aristotelian catharsis lies in “purification”, which, according to Brecht, “is not a pleasure in itself, but creates a pleasure instead” (Brecht, 1973, 47).

Brecht’s definition of catharsis, which is achieved through tragedy, infers indirectly a conclusion that Brechtian pleasure is not in itself a simple pleasure achieved through theatre, but rather a path, a discovery of new values of human society which provokes pleasure to the spectator.

The function of pleasure should not be didactic, because “theatre should not have didactic purposes” (Brecht, 1973, 46). The pleasure should instead serve to discover new values, which would be perceived and functionalized in the benefit of society as an opportunity to experience a Brechtian pleasure; be it spiritual or physical, simple or sophisticated. The pleasure should be perceived as a thought, as a new value that stimulates humans as social beings to transform themselves and society.

### Pleasure as an alienable value

In order to make the pleasure powerful and strong, theatrical projection of interactions and relations between people must reflect the originality (life reality). This reflection and projection does not represent illusionist theatre, but it represents our mindset and spectator’s mindset, which constantly change during the evolution of society. We have today an opinion for an “object”, but tomorrow we might have a different opinion for the same object. Therefore, a value of yesterday might not be considered the same value today or tomorrow and might be even transformed into an anti-value. For example, in a certain period of Albanian society, Hajria, who killed her own son out of revenge against her husband who betrayed and killed her brothers, was considered a value, but in present time Hajria might be considered as destructive or even an auto-destructive character.

The mindset therefore determines the change of approach and change of genre of a dramaturgic piece. The change of approach doesn’t relate to the change of story. For both, Aristotle and Brecht, the story is the soul of drama, which seeks elegant techniques to present “some details that inspire new visions in us…it is about those poetic and scenic techniques that conceive the difference between the subject and the object” (Brecht, 1973, 49). Therefore, the goal of Brechtian theatre is to get involved in real life events, because only in that way he can create and reflect the reality in the best possible way.

This theatre aims at “adapting the drama to the world” (B. Brecht), but also it aims at being able to continuously create new projections of people’s social life. The evolution of theatre happened thanks to “Brachtian originality” and discovery of new pleasures. According to Brecht, “art deals with sources of amusement, while the science deals with sources of human existence” (Brecht, 1973, 54). The Brechtian theater looks at the human society and culture as a “conflict zone” (Maigret, 2010, 170), because theater, drama and “dramatic situation is always the field of force” (Zuppa, 1995, 75).

Brecht’s originality, as above-mentioned, is not a form of illusionist expression or illusionist theatre and is not Stanislavski’s theatre. In this sense, projection of events as something that has past, prevents the projection of a real person as a social being through a character in a drama piece. Projection of an event and characters and their relations in a play in epic theatre must be carried out on the principles of synthesis of author’s idea, but this form of expression is not a primary purpose of the play.
Brecht and Stanislavski

Starting from the primary purpose of epic theatre or “theatre of the century of science”, respectively “dialectic theatre” (Brecht used several terms to describe his theatre), on which Brecht insisted, comes another function of Brechtian theatre, which he sought to offer it to the spectator.

In epic theatre, the spectator must feel completely free in his thoughts and judgements. The freedom of the spectator is achieved while he is being detached from the character or event projected on stage. This type of freedom is served to the spectator from director’s approach and thematic purpose of the play. According to Brecht, the actor “has the duty to show us and present the character and not only become embedded with the character” (Brecht, 1973, 69). Brecht also thinks that the embodying of an actor with character “if he was Lear himself would be devastating” (Brecht, 1973, 69).

In this point, Brecht and Stanislavski are diametrically opposed, because according to Stanislavski, the actor must feel his role to the extent that actor becomes the character, e.g., X – the actor is not only an actor on stage, but Hamlet himself.

Convergence and divergence of Brecht with Stanislavsky

During table rehearsals the actor has the possibility of “entering the character”, but, during the staging, this way of realization of the character should be avoided. Thus, Brecht system during table rehearsal does not exclude Stanislavski, because “entering the character” helps the actor find analogue factors of his character with the character of the character (the original), and this finding gives the opportunity to break through as deeper into the world of the character. As through this method the actor would make a “fine painting” of the character, then, after the actor finding the analogue factors, it is much easier for him to detect differential factors of his character and of the original.

Composition and de-composition of fables

“The fable is ... the most important element of the show” Bertolt Brecht

The actor cannot adopt the character unless it adopts the fable. Brecht reconfirms the Aristotels claim, according to the latter, “the spirit of the tragedy is a fable” (Aristotel, 2003, 65). The fable manifests all the events, all instant outbreaks that bring pleasure to the spectator.

During the staging of a dramatic work, the special events that build on the show with their structural composition should be determined by “basic gestures”. So, these events should be marked with the elements of alienation.

In the process of staging (mise-en-scène), the composed events of fable of the dramatic work should be treated as a specific event (situations), standing in the same time as part of the whole fable. Events or micro – events as structural parts of the whole fable content should be transformed into fragments, so the de-composition process of the fable should occur in the fable by the director and then they, as such, must contain the essence, characterizing yeast but at the same time that specific fragment should take a functional part in the whole show. In other words, a scenic carried out an event totality of fables, in
the process of staging (mise-en-scène) should be viewed by the audience as a special part of a whole, but in the same time that fragments must be in function of the development of the conceptual and thematic line stage show.

For Brecht, the fables is almost synonymous with a show, because “the fables is submitted, revealed, expressed, presented by the entire theater as a single whole by the whole team of actors, directors, painters, costume makers, musicians and choreographers” (Brecht, 1973, 87).

Cooperation of specialists and responsible teams responsible for the realization of the show aim at achieving the common goal, but they, according to Brecht, should not lose personal independence and originality.

**Gesture**

Gesture in epic theater is of crucial importance. “**Gestus** is a theatric aesthetic specificity of a dramatic situation in relation to the external theatric expression, and fable specificity of a certain situation in relation to the position of other situations” (Brecht, 1973, 31).

Through gesture, demolished parts of fables stand out, ie scenic fragments stand out. The gesture marks “node” that connects the fragments (situations, events) of the fable and at the same time makes this joint visible. The role of gesture can be defined as the denominator of the fragment, scenic situation.

General gesture of telling can be accomplished by music formulation, ie music as art and a song.

The painter through a **gestus** should provide an illusion of a whole object (not talking about the theater of illusion). Also choreography’s cardinal importance in presenting the role of an actor and this is achieved through exercises that are of a physical nature. When the actor manages through his perfectionist role play to present the role, then his movements, be they physical or mimicry, earn a refined elegance and this form of acting does not in any way eradicates its naturalist concept but strengthens it. In this regard, choreography serves as a distancing tool, but also as a tool to create lines of communication with the audience - scenic spectacle. In the end, the play, the game, in the strict sense of the word is realized to provide to the recipient, thus shows as a scenic totality should contain in itself “gesture of submission “ (Brecht, 1973, 90) to the spectator.

**Brechtian’s collectivism and Grotovski’s individualism**

Brechtian collectivism and Grotovski’s individualism are two parts of the system that are diametrically opposed. The common aspect is presentation and perfection of exposure. In Brechtian theatre, scenic presentation aims at changing collective values and anti-values becoming an amusement through which the spectator also learns and gets educated, while “Grotovski’s catharsis”, brings pleasure through scenic exposure in which the individual liberates his feelings. This type of liberation is not experienced only by the actor in Grotovski’s theatre but also by the spectators as part of performance, who discharge their frustrations, stress and emotions, which are blocked inside the individual due to some moral, philosophical, religious or national norms.
Function and purpose of Brechtian theatre

Didactic function of Brechtian theatre is not a purpose. The purpose is offering pleasure. Educational function of Brechtian theatre is didactic function, even though epic theatre should not submit to didactic function, but rather to the function of pleasure. The epic theatre realises the didactic function based on the support, it finds not only in other forms of art but also on science, because it has to be up-to-date with scientific achievements of humanity in order to carry out its didactic function and become coherent with the demands of spectators. But, is epic theatre a theatre of morality or is it an “institution of morality”? The first answer is no. The second answer is yes. No, because the epic theatre “wants to study rather than moralize” (Brecht, 1973, 113). Yes, because “it studies, but then comes the moral of the story” (Brecht, 1973, 113). A plain “yes or no” question, if analysed carefully could be understood as: epic theatre exists for people (theatre has to reflect reality) and not people for theatre (reality must not reflect what happens in the theatre) and so moral exists, because people exist.

Epic theatre has the character of exposure and as such cannot be created anywhere because it requires high technical standards and free exposure of reality in order to emancipate the spectators.

Brechtian epic theatre has a critical view of general collective standards and only in this way the theatre can cultivate its productivity because critical view of different phenomenon of a certain community is at the same time an artistic view.

Verfremdung obliges the spectator to take a critical view or detached view. This theatrical spirit requires transformation and transformation requires new emancipation. Emancipation is ensured by didactic function of Brechtian theatre, while the opportunity to gain emancipation causes pleasure to the spectator.

Conclusions

Brecht's epic theatre - dialectic on theatre, respectively his theatrical system has many times provoked misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Brechtian theatre is different from other theatrical systems, but it also has lots of similar elements. Brechtian Collectivity and Grotovski’s Individuality are differencing elements of the system which put them in essential opposing positions. The common aspect is presentation and the perfection of exposure. Epic theatre is not an illusionist theatre as is Stanislavsky’s theatre. The uniqueness of epic theater is its function and purpose. The didactic function of Brecht theatre is not a purpose, but is satisfaction.

For Brecht catharsis is not a satisfaction in itself, but it is the theater which brings the satisfaction for the spectator. Brecht reconfirms the Aristotles claim regarding the hierarchic elements of a show that “the spirit of tragedy is fables” (Aristotle, 2003, 65). For Brecht “...fable is...the most important element of the part and of the show”.

Brecht Theatre is coproduct of a group of arts, according to which, the duty of other arts, first lies in their selfrealization as an art, but at the same time it serves for the “articulation” of the show, and for articulating the differentiation. At the same time, epism also comes also as an artistic connection with other scientic knowledge. Brechts intention is to ensure that artistic spectacle reaches a high level of esthetics. V-effect is part of this spectacle.
Brechtian epic theater aims to ensure recipient’s (spectators, consumers of scenic theatre values) freedom of thinking, creation of judgement and an artistic attitude.

References