

A Study on Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan

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Abstract

Each play is produced with the use of a different method, and one of the methods which has a significant influence on drama is constructed by Bertolt Brecht. According to him, the best way to show his reaction against the system and stimulate the audience to take action against such system is epic theatre. His aim is to create a conscious society. For this aim, he uses epic theatre to create a distance between the play and the audience so that the audience can gain a critical insight. The reason is that such distance makes the audience use their reasons not feelings, which creates the feeling of rebel against the system including politics, economy (Benjamin, 1969). This helps the audience question the system and give the strength to change it. In order to activate the audience, he uses certain techniques of alienation based on distance between the audience and the play in epic theatre (Akçeşme, 2009). The Good Woman of Setzuan by Brecht is a significant play to analyse such techniques. With the techniques, he shows the injustice against the lower class and class distinction in the play. In other words, he leads the audience to question the capitalist society. Such techniques as giving a distant setting, the communication between the actor and the audience and the use of songs and verses can be observed throughout the play in order to break the illusion. Thus, this paper intends to analyse the techniques of epic theatre in the play The Good Woman of Setzuan to understand how Brecht break the automatized perceptions of the audience and show them a different world with the aim of rebel against the capitalist system.

Keywords: Bertolt brecht; Epic theatre; Setzuan; Drama; Capitalism.



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1. Introduction

How should a theatrical production be? Should it give a message to the audience? Should it break the illusion of reality or suspend it throughout the play? How should actors act? What are the roles of music, lightning or scenery during the play? These are the most demanding questions which have been asked by a lot of critics and playwrights for centuries. Everyone has his own explanation about how a play should be produced. Bertolt Brecht is one of them. According to Brecht, epic theatre was superior to other forms of theatre such as Aristotelian drama which is also known as dramatic theatre. His view of drama was totally different from conventional view. He used a new technique through which he was able to create a distance between the play and the audience, and also he made the audience gain a critical insight. His ideas were totally against the realistic characteristics which were used by playwrights upon the stage (Roberts, 1983). He created his works by staying loyal to characteristics of epic theatre as one can see in his play, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* which is the main concern of this paper. However, it would be useful to learn a little bit about Brecht's life and epic theatre.

2. What is the Epic Theatre?

The term, epic theatre, was firstly used by German director Erwin Piscator during the 1920s and 1930s to create new theatre forms. After him, Brecht used this term and made it flourish by using it to create a consciousness and make audience think. It is different from dramatic theatre. Dramatic theatre is used to look the events from only one point of view while epic theatre analyses the event from different points of view. For example; when a car crash occurs, epic theatre examines this situation from ten different views. Moreover, in terms of the relations between episodes, they differ from each other. In a dramatic play, every episode has a connection with other episodes. They cannot be thought separately (Hodgson, 1988). However, as Brecht states, in an epic play:

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.

The most important aim of epic theatre is to make audience use their reasons not feelings. The audience should give his own decisions after watching the play. Actually, at this point, Brecht sets against Aristotle who believes in the effect of catharsis (Mujumdar, 2013) Aristotle thinks that the audience see everything on the stage and identify themselves with the actors. They are possessed with the illusion of reality. They believe that they are in a real world and they are the actors or characters on the stage. In this way, they feel the happiness or agony with them. At the end of the play, they purify from these emotions and leave the theatre as nothing has happened. However, Brecht totally disagrees with this kind of an effect. According to him, drama should awake the audience and make him move. He asserts that "instead of identifying itself with the hero, the audience is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being (Benjamin, 1998).

The best way to do astonish the audience is using Verfrumdungseffekt/Alienation Technique. The playwright should tell the story such a way that he will be able to break the illusion of reality (Mujumdar, 2013). As one can understand Shklovsky's defamiliarization, Brecht wants to break the automatized perceptions by making them strange for the audience. Thanks to this effect, the audience can stand outside and study the experience while dramatic audience share the experience with the character.

However, how can it be possible? Brecht suggests the use of interruptions to accomplish this V-effect throughout the play. This can be made by adding some stage prompts such as songs, lightning, costumes or mask. To exemplify, the play can suddenly be interrupted by a song, or the setting of 20th century can be played by 18th century's costumes. There can be posters or tables which give information about the plot of the play. Thanks to this, the audience can stop identifying himself with the character and think about the course of the play (Willet, 1959). Since the story is important in an epic play, it should be familiar to the audience, but it should not be one of the recent events. The subject can be taken from the past. Usually the story is in the form of fable, and the setting is very remote from the spectators to create the V-effect. People will have a better chance to observe and criticize the situation.

The actors are also important for the creation of the effect. They serve as demonstrators or narrators. They interpret the situation. They are not like dramatic actors who lose themselves within their roles. Epic actors are aware of the fact that this is just a play, and they do their best to make the audience remember this. They suddenly stop and talk with the audience or ask the audience about their ideas. By doing this, they disturb them and break the illusion. Brecht also uses a device called Gesture to create the alienation effect. It is a position which is taken up by the actors at crucial sections of the play. This gesture shortly summarizes the feelings of the actors and stops the play for a while. The most famous gesture used by Brecht was his character, Mother Courage's face which is a pose in a silent scream (Willet, 1974).

All of these techniques are used to break the fourth wall between the audience and the stage. The fourth wall which is put there by realist writers is removed by the epic actor, lightning, music, setting and so on (Galloway, 2016). The audience turn into an observer and tries to decide. They do not accept the world as it is and try to change it. The epic play creates a feeling of rebel for the spectator because then, unlike the dramatic audience, they are able to see other options and want to help the character. Because of this, epic plays are didactic. They try to give a message to people about politics, economy or society. They help them to see the reality and question the system and finally change it. For Brecht, this message is usually about capitalist system, and he wants a revolution from the point of the audience. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is one of these plays in which he questions the capitalist society.

3. The plot of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

The play was written between the years of 1938 and 1943 when Brecht was in exile. It sets in Communist China. It... is a parable of a young woman torn among goodness, money, greed and power, between obligation and reality, love and practicality, and between her own needs and those of her friends and neighbors Suleiman (2011).

There is an epilogue and ten acts during which Shen Te, the protagonist, tries to stay good in cruel, capitalist and greedy world. She tries to be good and rich at the same time.

Three gods descend from the heaven to prove that there are still good people on earth. They visit Setzuan in which Wong, the water seller waiting for them. However, there is not any information about how he knows they are coming. The gods want to stay overnight, so Wong starts to ask everyone in the city to offer a place for them, but everyone refuses except Shen Te who is a young prostitute in the town. Even if she waits for a gentleman-caller, she ignores and invites the gods to her home. The gods appreciate her hospitality. In the morning, they give her a thousand silver dollars as a gift and leave the town with the happiness of finding a good person in the world. Shen Te buys a tobacco shop with this money, but everyone starts to disturb her for her money. The people, who have never talked to her before, come and want money. She is too good to say them no. Thus, to protect herself, she disguises as a cruel male cousin, Shui Ta. Even though they are the same person, Shui Ta is very different from her and does not let anyone to take advantage of himself. By the way, Shen Te falls in love with Yang Sun, an unemployed pilot, but he is just after her money like other characters in the play such as the family of eight, Mrs. Mi Tzu, the Carpenter and Mrs. Shin. Although Shen Te knows that he does not love her, she decides to marry him. However, Yang Sun decides not to marry her because she does not give him the money he wants. After this event, she learns that she is pregnant, and she pretends as Shui Ta for a long time. She buys a tobacco factory and becomes the king of tobacco to provide a good future to her baby. On the other hand, her long absence creates a suspicion among people who are fed up with the cruel male cousin. They go to court to learn what happened to good Shen Te, and three gods appear as judges. Shui Ta confesses that he is actually Shen Te after everyone leaves. Three gods are relieved to learn that the good person is still alive, but there is something wrong because as Shen Te, she commits some crimes such as causing the old couple lose their shops. She says:

Shen Te: I'm telling you I'm the bad man who committed all those crimes!

First God: [using – or failing to use – his ear trumpet] The good woman who did all those good deeds?

Shen Te: Yes, but the bad man too!

First God: [as if something had dawned] Unfortunate coincidences! Heartless neighbours!

Third God: [shouting in his ear] But how is she to continue?

First God: Continue? Well, she's a strong, healthy girl...

Second God: You didn't hear what she said!

First God: I heard every word! She is confused, that's all! (Sc.10,138)

Then they advise her not to disguise too often and keep being good. They leave the scene by offering no solutions to Shen Te about how to continue her life. The play ends without conventional ending. In other words, there is no resolution.

In this play, Brecht makes references to capitalism. He tries to show the injustice against the lower class and class distinction in the society. The play shows that being good in a capitalist world just harms you. If you always give but take nothing in return, this will prepare your end. In order to survive in such a cruel and materialistic society, Shen Te creates her capitalist cousin who takes care of the business. Without him, she is not able to survive. Her goodness just results in being exploited more than ever. By buying a tobacco shop, Shen Te enters into the middle class as most of the audience is. This class used to think that they are not exploited or exploit anyone, but they are very close to the capitalist class. As in the example of Shen Te, she buys a factory and turns out to be a capitalist. This is the situation of the audience, too. Brecht wants to make them aware of this fact and do something to change it. They should not accept everything which is imposed by the system and revolt against the regime. For Brecht, the only solution is revolution.

Shen Te lives in such a capitalist system that it is impossible for someone to stay good while saving her money. She should be cruel, so she experiences a big dilemma. Even in the Prologue, the reader can see her conflict: ...but there's the rent to pay. And that's not all: I sell myself for a living. Even so I can't make ends meet, there's too much competition. I'd like to honour my father and mother and speak nothing but the truth and not covet my neighbour's house. I should love to stay with one man. But how? (Prologue, 24).

The other important issue which is shown by Brecht is the inequality between men and women. As a female, Shen Te is unable to make people obey but as a male character, Shun Ta gains respect, and people start to be scared of him. People try to exploit her because of her gender. This is also a theme which is studied by Brecht who discusses these subjects in the form of epic theatre which is called as non-Aristotelian way.

4. The Good Woman of Setzuan as an Epic Theatre

As mentioned before, epic theatre has its own characteristics. This play is an example of epic drama. The first characteristic which makes it an epic theatre is its fable. To create a distance and to break the identification, Brecht suggests to use distant places and time as the setting. Even though he talks about the capitalist system in Europe and United States, he uses China as the setting (Mayer, 1971). Besides, the names of the characters are really interesting for the European audience. They even find it hard to remember and pronounce names like Shen Te, Shui Ta, Yang Sun and so on. This distance helps the audience to criticize and have a critical look over the issue.

The other characteristic of alienation which is important for epic theatre is asides. These asides are used as an interruption to disturb the audience. Normally in a dramatic play, an actor does not directly talk or address to the audience because he is afraid to lose the illusion of reality. However, in epic dramas, actors directly address to the audience to make them think and find a solution for the problem (Ladani and Parandeh, 2014). The reason is that it is the only way to make them move and revolt. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, there are a lot of examples for these asides. For example, Shen Te informs the audience about what happened after the gods left:

Shen Te (to the audience): It's three days now since the gods left. When they said they wanted to pay for the room, I looked down at my hand, and there was more than a thousand silver dollars! I bought a tobacco shop with the money, and moved in yesterday. I don't own the building, of course, but I can pay the rent, and I hope to do a lot of good here. (...) (Sc.1,26)

Another important feature which is used by Brecht is the use of songs and verses. There are constant interruptions by the musical interludes. This is done in order to alienate the audience and question the situation, too. There are important questions between the lines as one can see in the verses of Shen Te in Scene 10, when she complains about how to be good and keep surviving:

Shen Te: Shen Te, yes. Shui Ta and Shen Te. Both.

Your injunction

To be good and yet to live

Was a thunderbolt:

It has torn me in two

I can't tell how it was

But to be good to others

And myself at the same time

I could not do it (Sc. 10,136)

5. Conclusion

As is seen, these are the characteristics which make this play an epic drama. Brecht uses these conventions to create a conscious in the audience. For him, the audience should not identify themselves with the actor and purify from their emotions during the play. This purgation just makes them passive, and they do not do anything to change the system. However, as a Marxist writer, Brecht is discontent with the capitalist system, so he wants to change people's mind and activate them. The only solution is revolution. This is only done by using the elements of alienation upon the stage. These elements are, as mentioned before, disturbing the audience by asking them questions, breaking the illusion by songs, verses or posters, and giving a distant setting. Thanks to these elements,

they are able to see the truth, and they will realize that they can do something to change the system. This is the aim of Brecht while producing epic drama. He tries to break automatized perceptions of people and show them a different world. This is what makes epic drama a didactic work while raising awareness of the society.

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