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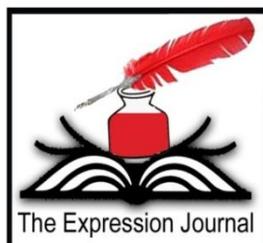
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The Educational Value of Brecht's Epic Theatre for Indian Students

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Abstract

Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, was an important theatrical reformer. His theory of an 'Epic Theatre', developed in the 1920s, departed from the tradition of Aristotelean theatre offering a new theatre which would not be 'dramatic', but reflective and thereby nurturing critical thinking. For Brecht drama is a social and ideological forum. It is a didactic drama presenting a series of loosely connected scenes and interrupting the story line to address the audience directly with analysis, argument, or documentation. Brecht uses a new technique called 'The Alienation Effect' designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performance. The purpose is to enable the spectator to exercise fruitful criticism from a social point of view. 'The Epic Theatre' of Brecht has an educational value also in the context of Indian education. Globalization has resulted in the crumbling of traditional norms and ways of living. The individual is presented with freedom of choice socially, culturally and psychologically. The younger generation in India is reacting to this change with an increased feeling of insecurity. A discussion of Brecht's plays (e.g. The Life of Galileo and The Caucasian Chalk Circle) will help the students in India to become aware of one's own cultural conditioning, differences between cultures, and gain cross-cultural communicative competence thus helping them to become stronger global personalities.

Key-Words

Bertolt Brecht, Epic Theatre', The Alienation Effect, Educational Value, Indian Students, Cross-Cultural Communicative Competence.

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Vol. 3 Issue 4 (August 2017)

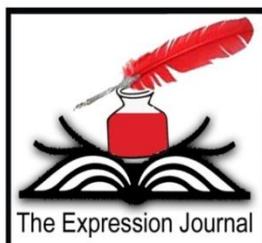
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THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF BRECHT'S EPIC THEATRE FOR INDIAN STUDENTS

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BERTOLT BRECHT

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a famous German playwright and poet. Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany in 1898 and lived there until the early 1920s. His parents were quite affluent. Brecht studied medicine at University of Munich before returning to Augsburg and serving in an army hospital during the First World War.

He started to write political poetry and plays at an early age dealing with social problems at that time in Germany. In 1933, Brecht was forced to leave Germany and go into exile to escape the Nazis. In Germany his books were destroyed and his citizenship withdrawn. It was during this exile that he wrote most of his great plays. In 1949, Brecht returned to a divided Germany. As a Marxist, he chose to live in the German Democratic Republic, which developed itself into a socialist state.

In East Berlin, which was the capital of the GDR, Brecht established his own theatre, the Berliner Ensemble. His contributions to theatre and his significance as a theatre practitioner have been acknowledged all over the world. Interestingly in the last part of his life, in the post-war period, Brecht was a citizen of Austria and not East or West Germany. Brecht received the National Prize of the German Democratic Republic in 1951. In 1954, he won the international Lenin Peace Prize. Brecht died of a heart attack on August 14, 1956.

While writing his plays, already at a young age, Brecht became very critical about the traditional dramatic theatre, which was based on the concept of Aristotle. Brecht considered the traditional theatre as nothing but escapism for several reasons. Brecht felt upset and frustrated about the fact that the audience could forget about their problematic life in reality while watching a play on the stage. Brecht wanted to seriously change the world of theatre in Germany.

Consequently Brecht developed a new theory of theatre in the 1920s. He offered a new style of theatre called 'Epic Theatre' through which he wanted to educate the audience, while

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deliberately pulling them out of the illusion created by the traditional dramatic theatre, about the social conditions around them. Brecht's aim was to inspire the spectators to think critically and act against the anomalies in the society.

For Brecht theatre was an appropriate pedagogical tool and an effective means of education and political change. In this context, Brecht coined a new term called 'Verfremdungseffekt' (Alienation Effect). By using the Alienation Effect the audience was to be motivated to realize that they were in a theatre just watching a play, and not the reality in the outside world. Consequently, they were made to remember constantly that they are looking at and experiencing a story on the stage and the actors were just communicating ideas and situations to them so that the audience does not get lost in the story or the characters.

The essence of his theory of drama is revealed in his theoretical essay *A Little Organum for the Theatre* (1949) and his plays like:

1. Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (Mother Courage and Her Children) (1941).
2. Leben des Galilei (The Life of Galileo) (1943)
3. Der gute Mensch von Sezuan (The Good Woman of Setzuan) (1943)
4. Der unaufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui) (1957)
5. Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti (Herr Puntila and his Man Matti) (1943)
6. Der kaukasische Kreidekreis (The Caucasian Chalk Circle) (1948)

The essence of his theory of drama is the idea that a truly Marxist drama must avoid the Aristotelian premise that the audience should be made to believe that what they are witnessing is happening here and now.

Characteristics of the Traditional Dramatic Theatre and the Epic Theatre in Contrast to Each Other

Let us now compare and contrast the characteristics of the 'Traditional Dramatic Theatre' and the 'Epic Theatre'.

'The Traditional Dramatic Theatre' brings an event to life on the stage and narrates the events in present tense. It involves the audience mostly only emotionally and ensures that the spectators remain just passive. It communicates the experience of other human beings and makes the audience part of their life and feelings. It also offers suggestions to the audience.

The Traditional Dramatic Theatre wants the actors to be emotionally involved when they play the characters by totally identifying themselves with the roles they are playing on the stage. It also characterizes the human beings as people who are unchangeable.

It diverts throughout the performance the eyes and the concentration of the audience towards the end of the play by letting the events follow one another and move in a straight line. The world is depicted as it is and not necessarily, what it could be or it should be.

'The Epic Theatre' in contrast to The Traditional Dramatic Theatre has entirely a different approach. It does not just bring the event to life, but relates to the event being depicted. The events are narrated in past tense.

The Epic Theatre involves the audience not emotionally, but rationally and motivates the spectators to start thinking on their own. It confronts the audience with an event, communicates valuable insight, and offers valid arguments to reflect upon.

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It neither wants the actors to play the characters with emotional involvement nor expects the actors to identify themselves totally with the roles they are playing. It characterizes intentionally human beings as people who are changeable depending on the circumstances.

It ensures that throughout the performance the eyes and the concentration of the audience are focused on the course of action and not only towards the end outcome of the play. In the Epic Theatre, the events move not in a straight line, but in irregular curves and they do jump in a random sequence. Thereby the world is depicted, as it is slowly changing and what it ideally should be.

New Techniques Used by Epic Theatre

Brecht intended his Epic Theatre to be quite distinctive from other forms of theatre. He wanted his audience to be constantly aware of the fact that they were watching a play and not the reality in which they were living. To ensure that they don't emotionally escape into an unreal and illusionary world, Brecht recommended the use of the following special techniques when the play was being performed on the stage.

There is a narrator who keeps on giving his comments during the play. The development of the plot is non-linear, fragmented and episodic. The story is presented not in a chronological order.

Actors play multiple characters. They do not play their roles realistically, and keep on addressing the audience directly about what is happening on the stage. They do not identify themselves emotionally with the roles they are playing. Actors are mere story tellers who demonstrate the problems to the spectators.

Music and songs are intermittently used to break up the action of the play. Placards are used to give factual and historical information to the audience. The stage directions meant for the actors are spoken out loudly. All these techniques break the illusion of drama. Brecht wanted the audience to question and challenge what they were seeing on the stage – not simply accept and enjoy.

Educational Value of Epic Theatre

When we look at the typical characteristics of the Epic Theatre, we realize that it has definitely an educational value. Epic Theatre not only teaches certain values and thereby educates the spectators. It motivates the spectators to start thinking and reflecting on the role of theatre and its didactical value.

Spectators are expected to watch the events on stage dispassionately. They have to arrive at their own conclusions rather than merely enjoy emotionally, what they are watching on the stage. Spectators are motivated to understand the social conditions and socio-political problems around them, critically think about them and act accordingly in their life.

“Leben Des Galilei” (Life of Galilei) (1939) and “Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis” (The Caucasian Chalk Circle) (1944)

Epic Theatre is conceived as an effective pedagogical tool to educate the audience and challenge them rationally and intellectually. We would like to point out to two dramas of Brecht, which are relevant also to the Indian students.

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“LEBEN DES GALILEI” (Life of Galilei) (1939)

This drama, written by Brecht in 1939, is based on the real life of the seventeenth century astronomer and physicist Galileo Galilei. The play takes place in 1609 in the city of Padua in Italy. Galileo is a scientist, an astronomer, who is in the process of teaching his disciple Andrea Satri about his newly developed theory of cosmology. This theory states that the sun is in the center not the earth. Thereby Galileo recommends that the way of reason, the way of doubt, and the way of creative skepticism will help the human beings to find appropriate solutions to the problems of humanity.

Since Galileo's views are radically different from the conventional truths established by the traditional Christian astronomers, the theory and the claim of Galileo is considered by the Catholic Church as a threat to its unquestionable and unquestioned power.

In 1632, the Inquisition summons Galileo to Rome and he is put on trial. Following the verdict of the Inquisition, under threat of physical torture, Galileo is forced to renounce his renounces his new findings. He is put under lifelong house arrest. Galileo's students are upset about his cowardice. In the end, Galileo declares: "I have betrayed my profession. Any man who does what I have done must not be tolerated in the ranks of science."

“Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis” (The Caucasian Chalk Circle) (1944)

“Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis” (The Caucasian Chalk Circle) is a play written by Brecht in 1944. The play is a parable about a peasant girl who rescues a baby and proves to be a better mother for the child compared to its wealthy natural parents.

During a bloody civil war, Grusha is forced to flee a Caucasian city in a Russian province in Georgia. While fleeing, she saves Michael, the son of Natella Abashwili, wife of the governor of the province. Years later when Natella returns to claim the lands of her deceased husband, she wants her child Michael returned to her. Since Grusha wants to retain the child, a legal battle ensues between Natella and Grusha over Michael.

An unconventional judge, Azdak, has to determine who the real mother is. He places the child, Michael, in a chalk circle, and tells Grusha and Natella to pull the child out of the circle, saying that the real mother will be able to pull the child from the circle. Whereas Natella tries to pull the child with all her strength, Grusha leaves the hand of the child, because she does not want to hurt Michael by tugging on him and the judge rules in her favor.

Epic Theatre for Indian Students

Globalization demands, also from young people in India, looking for career opportunities in an international context the capability to interact with people from different cultures and countries in day-to-day life. One has to accept in today's world the existence of multiple different realities and come to terms with the fact that given different circumstances there are indeed different perspective of the world from a cross-cultural point of view.

Globalization has resulted on the one hand in the crumbling of traditional norms and ways of living and on the other hand, the individual is presented with freedom of choice socially, culturally and psychologically. People are told that they are free to choose what they want, but at the same time are loaded with conflicting messages resulting in an increased feeling of insecurity.

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In this context, Epic Theatre can be used as an effective pedagogical tool to educate Indian students. A discussion on Epic Theatre with appropriate drama texts like “Das Leben des Galilei” (Life of Galilei) (1939) and “Der kaukasische Kreidekreis” (The Caucasian Chalk Circle) (1944) can help Indian students in several ways.

The story of Galileo raised questions like the responsibility of a scientist to speak out the truth and resist the social and political pressures. The role of ethics in professional life is an important topic in today’s world. This drama also throws up the issue of a teacher truthfully educating his students.

The story of Grusha and Natella and their claim to be the real mother of the child, Michael, highlights the importance of the bondage between the parents and the child, which is becoming a problem in the globalized world today.

Discussing these two dramas and perhaps even enacting them will help the students to expand the patterns of their thinking outside their self-identity and to explore other points of view. Students will also learn thereby to think critically about the socio-political problems around them and act accordingly to improve the society.

To start with, students will become aware of their own cultural conditioning and subsequently acquire appropriate knowledge and attitudes towards other cultures. This will make them understand and appreciate the differences between cultures. Consequently, they will not only acquire communicative skills, but also the required cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural communicative competence.

Students will learn skills that enable them to overcome problems in cross-cultural interactions with people from other cultures. In addition to this, students will be able to reduce their inhibitions, increase spontaneity, and enhance their motivation, self-esteem and empathy towards fellow human beings from other cultures.

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