

# About Brecht's *"Alienation"*



Victor Gomez

Preparing my presentation on Brecht, filled me up with excitement about an approach to theatre that I not only found fascinating, but even contradictory. As it was to expect, Brecht's challenging and stimulating vision of theatre, sparked my imagination and became a prospect for a wonderful discussion with the rest of the group.

Unfortunately - almost as a mock to Brecht's "distancing" - one thing is what we plan, and another one is what life has for us. This, as is obvious, forces us into a process of adaptation that requires us to be "in and out" at the same time, taking enough distance to be able to understand the phenomena, adopt a position, make a decision and take a new action.

Hoping then that Lisa gets better for our discussion in Artaud, I am putting here together some of my notes in what was supposed to be the presentation and discussion we would have had, if the phantom of the "swine flu" wouldn't have stolen that chance away from us last Tuesday. However, hopefully a parallel discussion between the "cruelty to the organism" and the "alienation of the spectator", would raise a very interesting view that might end-up shedding light upon our understanding of theatre and its mission.

To begin, let's just be repetitive and acknowledge in Brecht - after Ibsen and Strindberg - probably the most important European influence to theatre during the last century. He brought to the stage a revolutionary vision that rather seemed to reconcile Meyerhold's and Stanislavky's approaches, into a place that is not at all the middle of them, but an alternative, that appeared to be totally new. However, his inventions may not have been new at all. There is evidence that most of his 'innovations', what we know as *epic theatre*, were already invented long before by others.

His political, intellectual, artistic and social position, found in his writing and his plays the perfect home to present a whole theory that would legitimize his work, and frame that interestingly enough, as some of his closest collaborators seemed to agree, he often didn't seem to believe in, as stated by John Fuegi in his book *Brecht and Co.*

Despite the paradoxes and 'contradictions' - such as the "not... but", where the actor has to represent not only what he or she is doing, but also has to imply what he or she is *not* doing - that today continue to bring confusion around Brecht's professional work and his approach to theatre, it was his exploration - especially at the Berliner Ensemble - that opened the door to a new theatre. Without it, there probably would be no space today for Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, and many other innovators around the globe.

However, I ask myself how much personal history can influence a human being and an artist of the dimension of the controversial Bertolt Brecht, or how much it is his human condition, what in the end, happens to affect his own history, and - as a result - his work and the work of those who follow him.

Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria into a comfortable middle class family of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father. He was raised reading the bible, a strong influence from his upbringing that remained in his work from his school days.

The development of what, later on, would become his 'Non-Aristotelian Drama', has its roots in these early years, time where he also met his life-devoted visual collaborator, Caspar Neher, with whom he would create a theatrical movement of global repercussions.

When he was sixteen, the First World War broke out. In 1917, under his father's guidance, Brecht registered for medicine at Munich University, where he studied drama with Arthur Kutscher. There, his passion for cabaret was sparked, under the influence of actor, singer and playwright Frank Wedekind. Around the same time, just before he was called to serve for a short time in a military sexual health clinic a few months prior to the end of the war, he started to write articles critiquing theatre.

A few months later, Brecht got to work in a political cabaret, where he met the person who - besides Wedekind- would become his most important influence: comedian Karl Valentin. Among other things Brecht



deeply admired Valentine for his, "virtually complete rejection of mimicry and cheap psychology".

With Valentine, he would later have the opportunity of developing the experimental short film *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, found in 1972 in a Moscow archive, and accepted today as one of the most important films in German film history, regardless of being considered "just a little joke" by the dramaturge and screen playwright (images of this film appear in short experimental "*Bertolt Brecht Collage*" - which explores the mirroring concept of "*Alienation*": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2H-eJWW3ps>).

At the age of twenty, in one of his drama seminars, he wrote *Baal*, his first full-length play; and after *Baal*, he started a long list of other adaptations of other author's works, which would last throughout the rest of his career: "Anyone can be creative, it's rewriting other people that's a challenge", he used to affirm.

On the other hand, it is precisely this declaration that some of his most aggressive detractors - amongst scholars, collaborators and colleagues - use as evidence to insist his passion for adaptation really had more to do with his "artistic parasitism" and lack of respect for other author's work, than with any artistic vision, accusing him of stealing ideas that he would credit as his own.

The *Three Penny Opera*, for example, is one of those controversial cases: Elisabeth Haptmann is considered by Klaus Volker - one of the closest people in Brecht's circle - almost fully the author of this musical (except for the lyrics of the song *Mack the Knife*). She, however, would only hold the 12.5% of the contract as Brecht's assistant on the book; and something very similar is supposed to be the case with *Mahagonny*, in which Haptmann is not even credited at all as Brecht's co-author.

In spite of the controversy, at the age of twenty, the most important Berlin critics would recognize that Brecht would have "changed Germany's literary complexion overnight". Very soon after, he would start his directorial debut with his adaptation of *Edward II*, which he later recalled as the beginning of 'epic theatre', and the starting point to the 'Brechtian' collective and collaborative approach, whose mandate - in the concept of others such as Carl Weber - was to break with the personal individualism, becoming his collective experiment in the search of something "radically different from theatre as expression or as experience".

However, 'Epic theatre' was nothing really new. It would rather blend and continue with the research of Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold. But, experimenting with theatre as a medium for sociopolitical transformation, and the creation of a critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism, is something that had to be accepted as some of his most important contributions to theatre .

In fact, this dramatic development became related to innovations in other arts, such as the strategy of divergent chapters in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, Sergei Eisenstein's evolution of a constructivist 'montage' in the cinema, and Picasso's introduction of cubist 'collage' in the visual arts.

Strongly influenced by Marx's dialectic materialism, 'epic theatre' would come to innovative acting, dramatic theatre, opera and to promote social and political transformation, in the so called "scientific era". Bypassing the 'hypnotism' of the machinery in manifestations such as opera and the 'orthodox' Stanislavski's Naturalism, his intention was to democratize the theatrical experience, bringing it beyond 'the experience' itself. To achieve these goals, besides more than six months of rehearsal, and exhaustive Brecht's guidance, the company would base its work and exploration in three main tools: *Fable*, *Gestus* and *V-effect*.

With the support of the *Fable*, the *Gestus* and the *V-effect*, 'epic theatre' was expected to transform the dramatic theatre, "from having a plot, to developing a narrative; from implicating the spectator in a stage situation, to turning the spectator into an observer; from wearing down his capacity of action, to enhancing his responsibility to acting; from providing him with sensations, to force him to make decisions; from giving him an experience, to picturing the world for him; from involving him into something, to made him face something; from suggesting, to giving an argument; from preserving instinctive feeling, to bringing a point of recognition; from sharing the experience, to studying the situation; from taking the human being for granted, to make him the object of his inquiry; from seeing him as an unalterable entity, to make him alterable and able to alter; from having the eyes on the end, to bring them to the course; from where every scene makes the next one, to where each scene stands on its own; from growth, to montage; from evolutionary determinism, to jumps; from thought determining the being, to the social being determining the thought; and from the feeling, to the reason."



In this vision, the *Fabel* would describe an analysis the plot of the play, first, carrying out an analysis of the events portrayed in the story and the characters' social interactions; second, analyzing the plot from a formal and semiotic perspective, which understudies the dramatic structure itself; and finally, analyzing the attitudes that the play appears to embody and articulate (in the sense of the author's, the characters' and, eventually, the company's), which would determine its *Gestus*.

*Gestus*, on the other hand, carries the sense of a combination of physical gesture and "gist" or "attitude" or simply the "single aspect of an attitude", revealing, what is "expressible in words or actions." It is the embodiment of that attitude what uncovers the motivations of the dramatic exchange between characters and the narration of that character by the actor. It reveals a specific *aspect* of a character, making visible its social relations, beyond any psychological or emotional description. However, it is not

supposed to be a cliché, but - as in Meyerhold - it must be a research where the actor develops a character through a process of exploration of concrete physical behaviors, observed with selective realism during the rehearsal time.

"Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned the actor speaks his part not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation". Under this statement, Brecht asks his actors to give up any remarks of full human and concrete shape in their search for the character -although "it represents a copy"- by detaching from it and referring to it in third person, by transposing it into the past and by speaking the stage directions out loud. This would be, acting-wise, what we know as the *V-effekt* or *A-effect*.

The *Verfremdungseffekt* or V-effekt, vaguely translated to English as "Alienation" or "A-effect" - often defined as the "defamiliarization effect, estrangement effect, distantiation, or distancing effect" - creates a

distance between the spectator and the action to facilitate the engagement and rational position of the spectator, without offering anything else than what is necessary to demonstrate the point under study and analysis. This distance is also repeated from the actor to the text, and from the blocking to the play.

And it is here, in the so called "Alienation" where I would like to stop for a moment and ask if all the confusion around it, is not just simply another of the "Mysteries of a Barbershop", another Brechtian joke that would make him laugh now a days from his crypt, when he sees and hears people everywhere burning brains trying to understand how is that it should work.

At least in Toronto, theoretically, people seem to understand somehow what it means. However, when I go to the theatre in the city, and I see uncommitted "representations" that don't even reach the level of the street demonstration that Brecht uses so much as an example, I wonder if there's anything to blame to Brecht's theories here, or if it is just some kind of illness that attacks actors and directors who prefer to maintain some kind of political antisepticised neatness, that instead of intending to open space for the spectator to make decisions and take action, it rather finds a way out of any conflict by keeping such a distance with the truth and the emotions that this one unleashes that, neither the audience nor the actors, end up caring about the characters and their destinies.

However, what I find more interesting is, that despite the theory -which I wonder if it is more, some kind of philosophical frame than a practical technique- Carl Weber describes his experience seeing Brecht's *Mother Courage* in 1949, as the first time that he would see actors on stage behave like real human beings. Does this mean "believable demonstrations"? or does it mean committed connection with the characters and the given circumstances... with the truth? or perhaps what it means is that there is something missing in our interpretation of Brecht.

This would probably means then, that the reaction of the 'epic theatre' to the dramatic theatre and the classical opera -as the alienators of the spectators that hypnotize them, sending them to sleep away from their social and political reality- intends to be rather a response where the active participation of that audience alienates the play, and not vice versa. That would be the real disambiguation. That is why probably the word "Alianation" doesn't fulfill completely the translation of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, and it's maybe

the main reason for the "ambiguity" of Brecht's understanding in our context.

In the end, what I see is that there is no doubt when I attend a good play or a bad play -no matter how connected to the characters and their reality, or how "alienated" the actors and the play are- that I am seeing theatre and not a piece of real life. And even in those cases where the "*distancing*" is even bigger through a more complex symbolic and aesthetic approach -such as in the case of Lepage's *Nighting Gale*- I still can recognize that I am in the theatre. However, my emotional and intellectual experience has been permanent... Which I guess, might mean there could be a place of balance where theatricality and truth can meet, maintaining an active exchange and engagement for both actor/play and audience, beyond a scientific era, without a real need for any "alienation".