

Tikrit University
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Higher Studies/ M.A./ English Literature

Drama

Epic Theatre

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Epic Theatre is a 20th-century theatrical movement, most closely associated with German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht, that prioritizes critical reflection over emotional immersion. Unlike traditional "Aristotelian" theatre, which seeks to make audiences forget they are in a theatre through realistic immersion, Epic Theatre deliberately disrupts the illusion of reality to force the audience to think objectively about social and political issues.

Core Philosophy

The primary goal is to turn the spectator into an observer who can recognize and question societal injustices. Brecht believed that if audiences were swept up in the emotions of the characters (catharsis), they would remain passive about real-world problems. By maintaining distance, he hoped to inspire them to take action and change their world.

Techniques

Brecht developed several signature methods to achieve critical distance:

a-Alienation Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*): Techniques designed to "make the familiar strange," reminding viewers that the play is a constructed performance rather than real life.

b-Gestus: A style of acting where a physical gesture or posture expresses a specific social relationship or political message.

c-Breaking the Fourth Wall: Actors may address the audience directly, step out of character, or even read stage directions aloud.

d-Episodic Structure: Instead of a linear, continuous plot, plays consist of loosely connected scenes or "episodes" that can often stand on their own.

e-Visible Mechanics: Keeping stage equipment, lighting rigs, and scene transitions in full view of the audience to prevent them from "falling into a trance".

f-Multimedia & Music: Using placards, projections, and songs to interrupt the action and provide commentary or context.

Examples

1-Mother Courage and Her Children: Explores the devastating link between war and profit through an episodic narrative.

2-*The Threepenny Opera*: Uses satirical songs and non-naturalistic staging to critique bourgeois morality.

3-*The Good Person of Szechwan*: Examines the difficulty of remaining "good" within a capitalist society.

4-*Life of Galileo*: Focuses on the social responsibility of the intellectual and the impact of scientific discovery.

Meaning of Epic

In the context of literature and theatre, "epic" has two distinct meanings. While we often use it today to mean "awesome" or "grand," its technical definitions refer to a specific literary genre and a theatrical style.

1. The Literary Genre (Epic Poetry)

The term originates from the Greek *epos*, meaning "word" or "song". Historically, an epic is a long narrative poem that tells the story of a hero's great adventures and deeds, often significant to a specific culture or nation.

-Examples: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

-Characteristics: It usually features a "larger-than-life" protagonist, a journey across vast settings, and the involvement of supernatural forces.

2. The Theatrical Style (Epic Theatre)

In 20th-century drama, "epic" refers to the movement led by Bertolt Brecht. In this sense, "epic" does not refer to the scale or grandiosity of the production, but to its narrative form.

-Non-Aristotelian: Traditional "dramatic" theatre (Aristotelian) focuses on a linear plot and emotional immersion. Brecht's "epic" theatre focuses on a montage of independent scenes (episodes).

-The Narrative Element: In epic theatre, the play functions more like a storyteller's account of past events rather than a "slice of life" happening in the present. This encourages the audience to watch with critical detachment rather than getting swept up in the characters' emotions.