

Lessons from Brechtian theatre for Journalism

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Abstract:

The epic theatre of the renowned German playwright Bertolt Brecht has not only been path-breaking in the world of art and literature in terms of the technique and execution, but it also lays emphasis on the impetus to change the status quo of the society by raising voice against the injustice prevailing in the society, whether it is about class distinction or any form of discrimination. Brecht challenged the age old European and Aristotelian theatre which aimed at providing the audience a convenient channel to escape from the surrounding realities by creating a world of illusion. Brecht famously remarked that Art is not a mirror to the society; rather it is a hammer to shape the society. These remarks aptly sum up the greater purpose which Brecht sought to achieve through his theatre. The aim of this research paper is to draw a parallel between journalism and theatre with an ultimate target to highlight the relevance of principles of Epic theatre established by Brecht in the world of journalism in the contemporary times by citing examples from modern day Indian media.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht, epic theatre, journalism, alienation, Brechtian lessons

Introduction – Theatre and journalism:

Theatre and journalism are apparently two different forms of vocations. However, these are inseparable or overlapping in certain context. Historically, street theatre, a primitive form of theatre, used to serve as a “newspaper of the poor” to make masses aware of the happenings around them. By definition, journalism is a profession that deals with production and distribution of reports on current events based on facts and evidence. The commonality lies in the fact that both theatre and journalism are meant to target, or affect in certain way, an audience (or spectator to be more specific to theatre). In this comparison of two vocations, epic theatre, or Brechtian theatre is worth mentioning here as the ultimate aim of both arts is to permeate through the fourth wall in order to interact and/or modify the action/behaviour of its audience. In other words, like epic theatre, journalism in its ideal form, seeks to disillusion audience by making them aware about the surrounding social and political environment in a dispassionate manner thus forming their rational opinion and hence ultimately driving them into action.

Epic theatre:

The term “epic theatre” was coined by the well known German director famous for his proletarian plays, Erwin Piscator, with whom Brecht was associated during a crucial phase of his career in 1930s. Piscator, in his *The Political theatre* made following remarks about epic theatre:

It is not his relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society which is central.... It is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual, but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama. (Piscator)

Brecht was clearly against the dramatic or Aristotelian theatre meant for Bourgeois society. He was of the opinion that the spectators, instead of getting momentarily escape from the surrounding realities by emotionally connecting with the individual plight of the character on stage, should be emotionally distant and more observant and provocative to change the status quo around them. He wanted his audience to be analytical or intellectual instead of being empathetic or emotional towards the individual characters. While criticizing the ill practices of the traditional dramatic theatre of his times, Brecht famously remarked that audience at that time “hang up their brains with their hats in the cloakroom.” This is precisely what Brecht wanted his audience to avoid, in fact he expected his audience to be a critique instead of feeling emotional.

Suspension of Disbelief in traditional literature:

The well known British romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia literaria* or biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions, coined the term “Suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge). According to this principle, in order to fully enjoy any work of art, it is imperative on the part of the reader to deliberately and consciously suspend, though momentarily, the feeling of disbelief in order to believe it for the sake of enjoyment and pleasure. Shakespeare’s *Catharsis*, that is, purgation of emotions of pity and fear by feeling those very emotions displayed by the art or artist, is coherent to the same principle.

Brecht, in his theory of epic theatre, out rightly rejected the above doctrine which is meant to seek pleasure by sacrificing intellect. In fact Brecht deliberately created characters that would be subject to criticism instead of evoking sympathy. One classic example can be Anna Fierling, known as Mother Courage in one of the most remarkable plays of Brecht “Mother Courage and her Children”. Mother Courage, in spite of being the titular character and the protagonist of the play is often shown full of several contradictions throughout the entire play so that the audience, at no stage, starts feeling for the plight of the character. On one hand, Mother Courage loses her three children one by one due to war and its aftermath, while on the other hand she is shown as an opportunist who is a war-profiteer who makes business out of the war situation, thus praying that the war should continue. In fact, her name mother courage is also shown full of contradiction at the outset when she reveals to the Sergeant about the reason behind her name “Mother Courage” as:

They call me Mother Courage because I was afraid I would be ruined. So I drove through the bombardment of Riga like a madwoman, with fifty loaves of bread in my cart. They were going mouldy, I couldn't please myself (Brecht, Mother Courage and her Children).

Thus, it is deliberate on part of Brecht not to create a character which might lead to emotional connectivity with the audience. In fact, he wanted his audience to be emotionally distant and instead connect on intellectual level so that the focus should be on the larger political and social forces instead on being on the life of an individual.

Making audience active instead of passive:

Plato remarked that “*theatre is the place where ignoramuses are invited to see people suffering. What the theatrical scene offers them is the spectacle of a pathos, the manifestation of an illness, that of desire and suffering - that is to say, the self-division which derives from ignorance.*” (Jacques)

Brecht acknowledged this vice in the theatre world and thus always aimed to drive his audience in to action after watching his works. Brecht’s works arouses the audience’s capacity for action.

Journalism and its role:

Journalism or press is also called the fourth pillar of democracy. In principle, the journalism is based on fact and evidence and ought to be independent of personal opinion or prejudices. Neutrality is the key to the ideal journalism. It should aim at communicating the important events to the masses in a dispassionate manner. This trait of communicating things to the audience in a dispassionate manner is in fact the essence of *Verfremdungseffekt* (Brecht, Brecht on Theatre), commonly known as V-effect deployed by Brecht to achieve alienation or estrangement of the audience from the theatre. The technique of alienation is indeed the soul of epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht.

Distancing effect in theatre and news reporting:

In order to understand the V-effect or distancing effect of Bertolt Brecht, consider a situation when you are watching live telecast in front of your television set of a game which you highly admire. As the game will progress, it is quite natural that you will start feeling emotionally involved with it; you might start making small movements while sitting on your chair by imagining yourself in the middle of the field and playing the game yourself. You would be literally on the edge of your seat as you would be anxious about the end result. Now imagine another scenario wherein you are watching same game on same television set sitting on same chair, but this time around you are watching recording of this match; which means you are already aware of the outcome of the game. Now you will be calmer with your back resting on the chair with an ease. Another noteworthy difference is that you would be in a much better mental state to critically observe the game and judging the technique of the players instead of worrying about the outcome of the match. In short, you are now more observational or more critical in the second scenario instead of being emotional as in the first instance. Now if we try to draw an analogy between the above two scenario with the world of theatre, the second scenario is nothing but equivalent to epic theatre of Brecht in which the audience is at an intellectual distance from the proceedings of the play and are observational rather than emotional. This is the ideal state of assimilating the information in a dispassionate manner so that one can judge the situation better without being influenced from others.

There is a pressing need to create a similar distancing effect in journalism in order to achieve neutrality. A neutral and all around information should reach to the masses and that too in a dispassionate manner.

Now, if we try to look at the realistic picture of journalism in modern times particularly in India, it is no more an unknown fact that the journalism is getting more and more biased. There are several political, social as well as emotional factors behind this. The race of better Television Rating Point or TRP among various news channels worsens this

situation which further drives the news media to create an emotional web around the audience in order to entangle them longer.

Take the example of the times when Covid-19 struck worldwide in year 2020. In India, there were two broadly divided opinions during those times; one which was in favour of the nationwide lockdown to break the chain of Corona virus; and the other which was against it, citing the suffering of poor people who lost their jobs and had to walk long miles in order to reach their respective villages for survival.

On one hand, some specific media houses were all hammer and tongues in highlighting the role of particular community in spreading Corona virus; thus polarizing the entire pandemic scenario in a covert manner. There were also efforts to highlight the effect of the virus more in the states being run by the opposition party and not by the ruling party; there by creating a hysteria to highlight the incapability of the state government to handle the pandemic crisis. There were specific news agenda focusing on popular topics like Bollywood celebrity, suicide or drugs racket which although faded out after some time, but acted effectively as digression during the times when the nation was suffering with more serious and grave issues.

On the other hand, there were some specific media houses which showed the imageries of the suffering of poor people who had to walk down long distances in the absence of any means of transport in a format which was no less than an emotional dramatic film with a sad music playing in the background enhancing the emotional effect. There were sombre shots of trail of shabby slippers lying on highways and people braving the scorching heat barefoot with a melancholic music playing in the background.

It is to be noted that music and songs have been an inseparable part of Brecht's epic theatre as well, but the intention is diametrically different. While the music used in the above instance served the purpose of creating an illusion of emotions; it serves exactly opposite purpose in Brechtian theatre that it enhances the emotional distancing of the audience from the play so that the audience can connect at the intellectual level and act as a critique and set to change the society instead of feeling sorry for it. This is precisely what media houses ought to learn from Brechtian theatre.

While there is no denying the fact that the people suffered big time and in fact without having a fault of their own, but the news media in such situation ought to be absolutely inert and must present an all around viewpoint instead of highlighting one while ignoring other.

Creating suspense in contrast to the narration technique in epic theatre:

It has become almost a religious practice by all news houses to create the "what happens next" suspense so as to enable the insertion of commercials in order to gain economic edge. The news programs are deliberately designed in such a manner that the audience is kept entrapped by building suspense throughout the news programme. Consider the case of a sting operation carried out by a news channel against a famous film actor to expose casting couch in the film industry. But the otherwise social vice casting couch became a personal suspense filled story which targeted individual while the target should have been the whole class and the focus should have been social rather than individual.

Brecht had this realization that the problems should not be presented in the individual forms; rather the characters of his plays were representatives of a class so that the audience can have a rational outlook towards the bigger picture of socio-political scenario instead of individual plight. He wisely adopted narration technique in which the vital piece of information is told in advance during stage notes or in the form of signboards or placards so that there is no suspense left to emotionally entangle the audience and they are better placed to be observational rather than being emotional.

Consider the example of *Mother Courage and her Children*. In this play, Brecht passes on the main points of events to be occurred right before the beginning of the act. For example, in scene eleven, Mother courage loses her daughter Katrin, who sacrifices her own life in order to save the lives of the villagers from an attack. Katrin shows highest courage when she starts beating drum in order to raise alarm against the enemies. As a result, Katrin is shot dead by one of the soldiers. This is one of the most impactful scenes of this play. However, Brecht deliberately announces the main events to be happened before the beginning of the scene in the form of stage notes as follows:

Catholic troops threaten the protestant town of Halle. The stone begins to speak. Mother courage loses her daughter and journeys onwards alone; the war is not yet near its end. (Brecht, *Mother Courage and her Children*)

This is the essence of Brecht's epic theatre; that is not to create an emotional illusion. This is so because Brecht was as if on a greater mission to reform the society rather than gaining the sympathy of its audience which he could have easily got. But he deliberately adopted an emotionally plain approach so that the focus remains on the bigger problem of the society rather than the suffering of the individual. This is the main lesson which all media houses must learn from Brecht's theatre; as the prime responsibility of the media or journalism is to achieve a better society rather than gaining competitive leverage.

Dan Rebellato, in his article "10 cheers for Bertolt Brecht" remarks that Brecht is like those best teachers who do not force opinions and facts on their students- in fact they give their students tools for understanding. (Rebellato)

Brecht's plays inform us; they set in front of us moral and political puzzles to figure out. Brecht calls the educational aspects of his theatre "the cheerful process of finding out".

The famous Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan in the essay *Understanding Media*, famously remarks:

The content of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. (Marshall)

According to Marshall, it is the medium or structure, not the content, which brings subtle changes in the society. The structure of the epic theatre can fit well here as an inspiration to be followed as it ensures a medium that is impartial and disillusioned in the sense that the audience do not fall in a vicious emotional marsh.

Conclusion:

To sum up, it is hereby suggested that journalism students should learn from Brechtian theatre to acquire dispassionate reporting and informing viewers with an ultimate aim of turning them into active agents capable of bringing social change rather than turning them into emotional dormant beings. Brecht, in his poem “I need no Gravestone” mentions:

I need no gravestone, but

If you need one for me

I wish the inscription would read:

He made suggestions. We

Have acted on them. (Brecht, East German poetry. New York : E. P. Dutton, 1973, p. 19)

From the above poetry, it can be interpreted that Brecht, instead of driving the audience’s emotions towards an individual’s predicament by creating a web of emotions around the audience, presented an all around picture of larger socio political forces in a rational manner and let the audience act as per their sense of judgement. Journalism should also work on the same framework in order to fully play its role as an agent of bringing a social, political or cultural change. The notion of “Journalistic objectivity” which aims at fair, disinterested and factual presentation to the viewers can well be achieved by following the estrangement effects of epic theatre.

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