

The Berlin theatre's last phase was the so-called epic theatre, and it showed the modern theatre's trend of development in its purest form. What- ever was labelled '*Zeitsück*' or '*Piscatorbühne*' or '*Lehrstück*' belongs to the epic theatre.

THE EPIC THEATRE

Many people imagine that the term 'epic theatre' is self-contradictory, as the epic and dramatic ways of narrating a story are held, following Aristotle, to be basically distinct. The difference between the two forms was never thought simply to lie in the fact that the one is performed by living beings while the other operates via the written word; epic works such as those of Homer and the medieval singers were at the same time theatrical per- formances, while dramas like Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred* are agreed to have been more effective as books. Thus even by Aristotle's definition the difference between the dramatic and epic forms was attributed to their different methods of construction, whose laws were dealt with by two different branches of aesthetics. The method of construction depended on the different way of presenting the work to the public, sometimes via the stage, sometimes through a book; and independently of that there was the 'dramatic element' in epic works and the 'epic element' in dramatic. The bourgeois novel in the last century developed much that was 'dramatic', by which was meant the strong centralization of the story, a momentum that drew the separate parts into a common relationship. A particular passion of utterance, a certain emphasis on the clash of forces are hallmarks of the 'dramatic'. 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.

This is no place to explain how the opposition of epic and dramatic lost its rigidity after having long been held to be irreconcilable. Let us just point out that the technical advances alone were enough to permit the stage to incorporate an element of narrative in its dramatic productions. The possibility of projections, the greater adaptability of the stage due to mechanization, the film, all completed the theatre's equipment, and did so at a point where the most important transactions between people could no longer be shown simply by personifying the motive forces or subjecting the characters to invisible metaphysical powers.

To make these transactions intelligible the environment in which the people lived had to be brought to bear in a big and 'significant' way. This environment had of course been shown in the existing drama, but

only as seen from the central figure's point of view, and not as an inde- pendent element. It was defined by the hero's reactions to it. It was seen as a storm can be seen when one sees the ships on a sheet of water unfolding their sails, and the sails filling out. In the epic theatre it was to appear standing on its own.

The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on the stage - by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany ab- stract conversations, by figures and sentences to support mimed transac- tions whose sense was unclear - but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experi- ence uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject- matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of aliena- tion: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up.

What is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different.

It was all a great change.

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep. I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it - That's not the way - That's extraordinary, hardly believable - It's got to stop - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary - That's great art: nothing obvious in it - I laugh when they weep. I weep when they laugh.

THE INSTRUCTIVE THEATRE

The stage began to be instructive.

Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the mar- ket, all became subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses en-

*Especially consider our laughter
of the man and wife in
"The Informer"*

people have worked to find out how man can improve his condition, and today we know that he cannot do this purely privately. It's only by banding together and joining forces that he stands a chance. Once I take that into consideration my plays are forced to deal with political matters. Thus when a family is ruined I don't seek the reason in an inexorable fate, in hereditary weaknesses or special characteristics - it isn't only the exceptional families that get ruined - but try rather to establish how it could have been avoided by human action, how the external conditions could be altered; and that lands me back in politics again. I don't mean that all playwrighting ought to be political propaganda, but I do feel that one shouldn't be satisfied with just one way of writing plays. There should be several different sorts for different purposes.

All this demands a new and special technique, and I'm not the only writer to have tried to create it. People like Georg Kaiser and his follower O'Neill have successfully applied quite new methods which are good and interesting even if their ideas don't coincide with my own. In the same way Paul Claudel in France, a severe and reactionary writer, is an original dramatist of great stature. In such ways people who have nothing new in mind have none the less done pioneering work for the new technique.

Of course those actors whom we employ have also to use a special method of representation. We need to get right away from the old naturalistic school of acting, the dramatic school with its large emotions: the school followed by people like Jannings, Poul Reumert, in short by the majority. This isn't the kind of representation that can express our time; it isn't going to sway a purely modern audience. For that one has to apply the only form of acting that I find natural: the epic, story-telling kind. It's the kind the Chinese have been using for thousands of years: among modern actors Chaplin is one of its masters.

This was the kind of acting that was always used in our theatres; you in Denmark may know a bit what I mean from *The Threepenny Opera*. The actor doesn't have to be the man he portrays. He has to describe his character just as it would be described in a book. If Chaplin were to play Napoleon he wouldn't even look like him; he would show objectively and critically how Napoleon would behave in the various situations the author might put him in. In my view the great comedians have always been the best character actors.

Does that give you some slight impression of my ideas? Then please end up by saying that I don't think Fascism is going to be able to put a stop to the natural development of the younger German school of playwrighting, though heaven knows where it will be carried on.

[From *Extrabladet*, Copenhagen, 20 March 1934, quoted by Helge Hultberg in *Die ästhetischen Anschauungen Bertolt Brechts*, Copenhagen 1962]

NOTE: The interviewer here was Luth Otto and the words, translated into Danish and back into German, are hardly Brecht's. One or two evident misprints have been corrected, but mistakes like the identification of Meyerhold's theatre with the Moscow Art Theatre, the misnaming of Lania's *Konjunktur* and the reference to 'my' Theater am Schiffbauerdamm have been allowed to stand. Helge Hultberg also queries Brecht's claim to have been a producer 'long before any of my plays were staged', but this seems more an exaggeration than an inaccuracy. Brecht was in fact engaged practically in the theatre for at least a year before *Trommeln in der Nacht* was put on, taking part notably (if only temporarily) in the production of Bronnen's *Vatermord* for the Berlin 'Junge Bühne' in spring 1922.

At the time of the interview Brecht had settled in Denmark, where the writer Karin Michaelis had lent him a house. He remained there till 1939, presently moving to a house of his own at Skovsbostrand near Svendborg.

Poul Reumert, the Danish actor, is referred to again on p. 141. His book *Theatres Kunst* was published in Copenhagen in 1963.

Plays staged at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm under E. J. Aufricht's management included *The Threepenny Opera* and *Happy End* and Marieluise Fleisser's *Die Pioniere von Ingolstadt*. §218 was by Carl Credé.

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A few years back, anybody talking about the modern theatre meant the theatre in Moscow, New York and Berlin. He might have thrown in a mention of one of Jouvet's productions in Paris or Cochran's in London, or *The Dybbuk* as given by the Habima (which is to all intents and purposes part of the Russian theatre, since Vakhtangov was its director). But broadly speaking there were only three capitals so far as modern theatre was concerned.

Russian, American and German theatres differed widely from one another, but were alike in being modern, that is to say in introducing technical and artistic innovations. In a sense they even achieved a certain stylistic resemblance, probably because technology is international (not just that part which is directly applied to the stage but also that which influences it, the film for instance), and because large progressive cities in large industrial countries are involved. Among the older capitalist countries it is the Berlin theatre that seemed of late to be in the lead. For a period all that is common to the modern theatre received its strongest and (so far) maturest expression there.