

An introduction to Brechtian techniques

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Stephen Kennedy: He really had almost a strangely split mind between the academic part of him that wrote theory and the man of the theatre who refused. He would, even in rehearsals, say, "I don't know what idiot wrote this theory" or "I don't know what idiot wrote this part of the play."

Tony Kushner: I mean, that said, I think that what one gets from reading the theoretical work is somebody who is grappling with the profoundest truths about the theatre and the very heart of what we talk about when we talk about the quality that we describe as theatrical. He sees a creeping naturalism that he knows, in part, is going to come from the most unnatural of all media, from film. And he's saying, "Don't try to compete with this, you're going to lose and it's not interesting." I mean, I think that what he's really talking about is the essential dialectic of the theatre, which is that it creates an illusion that is both effective and not at the same time, that it asks you to believe deeply in something that you are absolutely aware is artificial and fake and that you hold both of those, feelings and awarenesses, belief and disbelief, in the same place, in the same impossible tension. And that you start to understand through theatre, I think he means to say the double nature of reality.

Sophie Stone: But that's what life is like. You know, you can have Leona Lewis singing for the boys out in Afghanistan to try and lighten things up. And then, five minutes after she's gone, boof! And we're not meant to sit comfortably and predict what's going to happen because that's not what this play is about. And I think the more they throw in things that are unexpected, the more that they shake you up when you feel like you know where this is going.

Bitesize

- Tony Kushner:** The new, sort of, modern way of talking about this is distanciation and I think that, you know, it's making the familiar strange and the strange, familiar, as he says. As I was just saying, I feel that in a way, theatre does that automatically.
- Stephen Kennedy:** Gary Sefton, in the play, who's the guy who plays the sergeant at the start and he does all the bombs and he does sound effects. He does the sound effects and various things. That, to me, is alienation. Because you see something that exists outside of the play. But, in some weird way, and I still can't articulate why, in some weird way, that was drawing me further into what was happening on the stage because there was something. You have the narrative and you have the story of what's going on. And then, all of a sudden, there's a man who exists outside the play, doing sound effects of a bomb going off, or something else. But you see that the people are experiencing what he is doing outside the play as a reality. And it does, it does something very strange.
- Rocky Shahan:** That's Brecht, absolutely Brecht. You know, very simple and you may have noticed that also the stage personnel such as the sound, lights and the stage technicians where they would normally wear black, they would be in black during the production on stage, but are not on this particular play. Deborah Warner didn't want that. She wanted everyone to come as they are in their own clothes.
- Mother Courage:** Stone by stone they climb but their efforts leave them worn and weak. Broken down they barely make it back to bed.
- Stephen Kennedy:** It's not only that you can see all the stage crew coming on to do what their job would be, you know, behind the scenes, what Deborah has done, as well, she's taken every single wall away, everything. And you see the theatre itself as the theatre is.
- Narrator:** Mother Courage observes the funeral of the fallen.

Bitesize

Deborah Warner: And for some people, it was just visually exciting. For some people, I'm sure it meant a great deal in terms of Brechtian theory. For some people, it would have said something about war and about humanity and about us all. It was another layer.

Tom Pye: His ideas of alienation when he was writing this play, would have been staggering to the audience. They would have been very disconcerting. And all those methods have just been taken up as general practice. I mean, every play since then, well, not every play, but it's become very typical theatre language to see lights, to have abstract scenery, to have music, all the Brechtian techniques of alienation are used very regularly.

Deborah Warner: All of us have been, have made theatre within the slipstream of this extraordinary miracle of what Brecht actually did.