

DRAMA

How does Brecht use his practice of epic staging to jolt his audience into thought and action?

Through use of alienation techniques, the historification of the plays and the use of didacticism, Brecht jolts his audience into thought and action. This is illustrated through the two plays 'Mother Courage and Her Children' and 'Three Penny Opera'.

The use of historification in these plays serves to distance both the previous and contemporary audiences. Additionally, Brecht has alienated his audience effectively for the purpose of giving them insight into the corruption of society and the values of society. Through this, Brecht allows his audience to clearly identify the true heroes in the plays as well as the corrupt morals of the false heroes in the plays. I have gained insight into this through my experiential learning of the plays, where the use of narration, character reflection, the breaking of the fourth wall as well as over exaggeration, are used to remind my audience that they are watching a play.

'Mother Courage and Her Children' is an anti-war symbol which confronts the audience with complex ideas through representative characters and events. The play is set during a thirty year continuing war, illuminating the nature of war as a heartless business and personifying the human capacity for selfishness in the main character of Mother Courage. Brecht illustrates this selfishness through the dialogue of the soldiers, who say that Mother Courage 'likes the war to eat the pips but spit out the apple? It's to fatten up your kids but you won't invest in it. Got to look after yourself, eh?' This line as well as Mother Courage's prophecy where she predicts the death of her children is a foreshadowing of mother courage's loss of her children due to her 'feeding' of the war. Here we see the voracious appetite of war- it is a machine that swallows our humanity. I have gained insight into this through my group workshop of this scene, where the soldiers' line was directed to the audience, jolting them into thought in order for them to examine and question the role that mother courage plays in the war.

Mother Courage's name is not truly representative of her actual character. In the context of the play she appears heroic because she has sustained her business and maintained her strength throughout the entire war. However, as a result of her quest for survival she loses all her children yet still continues to survive from the war. Through this Brecht is illustrating how dehumanized and consumed by things we are once in survival mode. I have attempted to illustrate this to my audience through my workshop, where Mother Courage's son Eilif is stolen from her as a result of her being distracted by potential customers. This reveals Mother Courage's distracted nature, her weakness of the entire play. In my workshop, Mother Courage also sings a song of 'The Grand Capitulation' as her idea of a complaint but by the end of the song she realizes that she no longer wants to complain. This further foreshadows Mother Courage's loss of her children as she is always to be sidetracked by her need to survive.

Another character of the play who appears to be a hero is Eilif. In the scene where Eilif and the General are celebrating Eilif's 'victory' over dinner, the audience is able to ascertain the power play between Eilif and the General. In another workshop, Eilif is performed in a pompous and exaggerated manner to show that killing peasants was a gain to him, rather than the tragic destruction of human life. The insights gained from this were Brecht's political intentions such as the false glorification of war and deeds of massacre. This scene invited the audience to examine the ramifications to the human psyche. This coupled with mother courage's exaggerated eaves dropping and prideful demeanour leads us to question the dehumanizing effects of the war. It is through Brecht's alienation that we are able to recognize Eilif as the antagonist of society, especially if this were to happen in contemporary society.

In the play 'Three Penny Opera', Brecht allows his audience to see individual characters as criticisms of the bourgeois class in their political context. Brecht employs irony to provoke thought and mock traditional values of bourgeois class. This challenges the audience to criticise the characters and in turn assess the values of their own political context. I have gained insight into this through my experiential learning of the play, where my group utilises the song 'Mac the Knife' by Frank Sinatra to establish our characters as those who pretend to be criminals. We appear to be serious however through the use of choreographed dance moves we illustrate the stupidity behind our characters. During this time, one of our members is handing out 'wanted' posters for Macheath. This contrast between the policeman and the criminals is shown through the use of the policeman's out of place dance moves and the breaking of the fourth wall. Despite this, the criminals continue to dance with the policeman, foreshadowing the corruption of the values of the society within the play.

Brecht's plays are a presentation rather than a representation of the corruption of our society. This is illustrated in scene 2; 'An Empty Stable', where Mac the Knife is getting married to Miss Polly Peachum in the company of not only his criminal friends, but a police officer Sherriff Brown. Here Brecht uses didacticism to teach the audience the irony of Macheath, a man with no moral compass or spiritual belief, getting married in a Stable, where Jesus was said to be born. Furthermore, through the use of Macheath's 'friend', Sherriff Brown, the audience also gains insight into the irony of having a high power of authority dismissing criminal activities because of friendship. This highlights the corruption of the bourgeois class; jolting the audience into thought and action about the role that authority plays within that society. However, in my group workshop of this scene, a song about 'Bill Lawgen and Mary Sawyer' is used in order to break the tension, turning a tragic death of a couple into a humorous act.

The corruption of society's values is again a theme in the last section of the play, where the Peachums are plotting the demise of Macheath but in fact get arrested themselves for the purpose of both irony and humour. The Peachums are a representation of the social underworld. However, within that world there is a hierarchy and the Peachum's have the belief that they are at the top of the hierarchy. The irony is not lost on us or our audience who clearly distinguish their characters as an image of false sophistication. In my workshop, my group has illustrated this through Peachum's affair with his maid as well as Mrs. Peachum's crudeness and obscenity.

Overall, through my study and experiential workshop of the two plays 'Mother Courage and her Children' and 'Three Penny Opera', the audiences and I have gained insights into Brecht's comment on the corrupt values of our society as well as the power and the hierarchy of the underworld. Brecht also clearly identifies his true heroes in his plays as opposed to characters such as Mother Courage who are only heroes in the context of the play. All of this is illustrated through techniques such as narration, song, the breaking of the fourth wall as well as over exaggeration. The purpose of this is to jolt audiences of Brecht into thought and action about these issues and concerns that are still present in our society today.