Brechtian techniques

The theatrical conventions developed by Brecht are surrounded by much confusion. Although he wrote extensively on the dramatic theory behind his work, some aspects are still vague. To understand it, we must evaluate his theatrical conventions and how they relate to both his writings and productions, whilst keeping in mind that Brecht's techniques were a by-product of his environment (see [Influences on Brecht section](#)). His theatre is best described as a dramatic vessel of rational didacticism, influenced by his Marxist beliefs.

In order to incorporate Marxist theory in his works, Brecht devised various dramatic techniques to convey his message. Techniques such as the verfremdungsteffekt/alienation effect, didacticism, breaking the fourth wall, gestus, narration and use of song all encompass the Brechtian theorisation of Epic Theatre - a convention first founded by Irwin Piscator.

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Epic Theatre

Epic Theatre is the term used generally to describe Brecht's theory and technique. His plays were 'epic' in that the dramatic action was episodic - a disconnected montage of scenes, non-representational staging, and the 'alienation effect'. All elements contribute to Brecht's overall purpose which was to comment on the political, social and economic elements that affected the lives of his characters. In *Brecht on Theatre* he outlines the differences between Epic and Dramatic Theatre as follows:

Dramatic Theatre	Epic Theatre
Plot	Narrative
Implicates the spectator in a stage situation	Turns the spectator into an observer
Wears down his capacity for action	Arouses his capacity for action

Provides him with sensations	Forces him to take decisions
Experience	Picture of the world
The spectator is involved in something	He is made to face something
Suggestion	Argument
Instinctive feelings are preserved	Brought to the point of recognition
The spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience	The spectator stands outside, studies
The human being is taken for granted	The human being is the object of the enquiry
He is unalterable	He is alterable and able to alter
Eyes on the finish	Eyes on the course
One scene makes another	Each scene for itself
Growth	Montage
Linear development	In curves
Evolutionary determinism	Jumps
Man as a fixed point	Man as a process
Thought determines being	Social being determines thought
Feeling	Reason

Taken from: Willet, J. *Brecht on Theatre*. Eyre Methuen, London, 1974

Verfrumdungseffekt/Alienation Technique

Verfremdungseffekt can be most accurately translated as the 'making strange effect', and it seeks to do precisely that; to make the familiar strange, to give every day events the status of something grand or epic. The 'Alienation Effect' was developed by Brecht in the 1920's and 30's. It is a technique which 'estranges' the audience and forces them to question the social realities of the situations being presented in the play. Brecht achieved this by breaking the illusion created by conventional plays of the time. He believed that the 'suspension of disbelief' created by realistic drama was a shallow spectacle, with manipulative plots and heightened emotion. This theatre is a form of 'escapism' and did not challenge the audience at all. Rather than feel a deep connection to the characters Brecht believed that an emotional distance should be maintained. It is only when this happens, that the audience can effectively critique and evaluate the struggle between the characters and understand the social realities of the narrative. This is evident in *Mother Courage and Her Children* when we see Mother Courage singing a lullaby to her daughter Kattrin and then later paying for her funeral without any emotion. The ambivalence and irony of the characters, particularly Mother Courage is what is so alienating about the play. We find ourselves constantly questioning the role of Mother Courage. What kind of mother is she? Why is she called Courage? How is she courageous? The audience questions the presentation they see before them, which is exactly what Brecht wanted his audience to do.

Didacticism

Didacticism is the instruction or teaching of a moral lesson. Brecht's plays are didactic in that they all serve to teach the audience or send a message about certain aspects of society, politics or economy. They are plays which are designed to educate the performers and audience. It stems from Brecht's Marxist beliefs and the plays generally show the bourgeois society negatively and the rightness of Marxist morality. In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, specifically, the didacticism lies in the contradictions of the characters and how their choices have affected their lives and the value of it. The idea that Mother Courage is driven by making money and not taking care of her children is shocking to the audience. Whenever her children need her she is making a business deal. Her actions make the audience question: how much is life really worth? How much am I like Mother Courage? What would I change or do differently? The play teaches a lesson about society, economy and politics and wrestles with these throughout the play.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

'The Fourth Wall' is an imaginary wall separating the audience from the action on the stage. In realistic productions this wall remains intact and the performers do not acknowledge that they are being watched. The audiences are observers who are conditioned to believe that the world of the play is 'real'. It is a suspension of disbelief. Like most theories of realism, Brecht wanted to disrupt the notion of the fourth wall. 'Breaking the fourth wall' involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience, whether they break character or perform with an awareness of being watched. It is made clear that the characters and their actions are not real and the audiences are aware that they are witnessing fiction. The theory behind this technique links back to his definition of Epic Theatre. By taking away the fourth wall the audience must face the action, make decisions and have the opportunity to be aroused to action (see [Epic Theatre table](#)).

Acting Techniques

Brecht believed that an actor should present a character in a way that wasn't an impersonation, rather, a narration of the actions of the character. He did this because he wanted to constantly remind his audience that they were watching a play. He also believed that if the audience developed an emotional attachment to the characters, then they could not evaluate the social realities of the play. Stanislavski thought that if an actor believed he was a character, then the audience would believe this as well, and feel the emotions that the character was feeling. Brecht did not want this to happen; he wanted the audience to question, make comment and interpret what was on the stage. The Brechtian theatre does not show the human nature of an individual but reveals collective human relations. The story is the point of interest, not the characters. The story is the sequence of events that is the social experiment, allowing the interplay of social forces, from which the play's lesson emerges. If the audience does not maintain a distance between the characters and themselves then this cannot be achieved. Acting in Epic Theatre means that an actor is required to play characters believably without convincing either the audience or themselves that they are, indeed, the characters. There is an audible and visual distance between the actor and their character and the actors will often 'break the fourth wall' and

address the audience, play multiple characters and use exaggerated or repetitive actions to make their distance and social commentary known.

Gestus

Gestus is a theatrical technique that helps define the emotion within a character and the context they are in. It is the combination of a gesture and a social meaning into one movement, stance or vocal display. It can be alienating and jar the audience, as it is an unusual and non realistic way of forcing them to see the ‘ bigger picture' of a situation. It is sometimes referred to as the 'social gest', as it is an action that allows the audience to understand something specific about the social circumstances presented on stage. For example, if a man was eating a sandwich and a dog suddenly attacked him and tried to take his food while the man tried to push the dog away, this would not be gestus. The act of pushing the dog away becomes gestus when social meaning is added to the picture. For example, the man is a servant in a castle and the dog belongs to the guards at the gate and they have let the dog out knowing that he will attack the man, and they are standing off to the side laughing at him. Now the action of pushing the dog away has become gestus as it is an action that holds social meaning. The audience knows that this is not just any man; this is a working class man who is being picked on by people with a little more power over him.

The most famous example of gestus is in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Mother Courage shows her inner emotional turmoil not through words, but through a physical presentation. She looks at the audience and delivers a silent scream. Again, it is not the action alone that makes it gestus, but rather the combination of this action and the social meaning. Mother Courage has just lost a son, but if she makes any sound of recognition towards him she will put her life and the life of her daughter in danger. Now she represents any person who has had to keep quiet in order to save somebody else. She has been forced into a terrible situation and the audience gets to see this through her gestus of a silent scream.

Narration and Song

Not only was Brecht a writer, director and producer, but he was also a great poet. He wrote many songs for his productions, mostly in collaboration with Kurt Weill. The purpose of song in his plays is not to heighten the emotion of the scenes but as a means to commentate or narrate what is going on. It is also a form of alienating the audience, for example, in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the songs' content may be serious and forewarning of hardships, while the music is happy and light. It shows a lighter side to a deeply serious situation and the dichotomy and ambiguity of it ultimately alienates the audience and makes them question the social realities that are being presented. The music and the action should serve to make each other seem strange. The music composed for USQ's production by Lauren O'Rourke has a very broad style. It is eclectic and each song is composed in a way that questions what the moment and characters are seeking to achieve. Lauren is also acting in the production, and because she has such a close relationship to the process and the story, it has made the music so much more fitting to the production.