

Conceivable Extensions of Epic Theatre

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Maxim Gorky's book "Mother" is a standard novel with complex characters, interweaving relationships, and realistic portrayals of character development, depicting one man's struggle to free his people, and his influence on his widowed, uneducated mother. Bertolt Brecht's adaptation of Gorky's "Mother" is an example of Epic Theatre. Brecht's adaptation retains the theme and major characters of Gorky's Mother, but reduces the novel to a concise play whose goal is to teach as many people as possible, and explain in simple terms the causes and needs for a revolution by the lower classes.

What conscious decisions did Brecht make that made his "The Mother" more accessible to the masses? First and foremost is Brecht's decision to transform "Mother" into a play. A play, unlike a novel, does not require the ability to read (although, strangely enough, Brecht's "The Mother" does include the intermittent presentation of slogans or statements to the audience). Also, whereas a novel can only reach one person with each presentation, a play can reach many hundreds of people; and since "The Mother" is of the epic genre, whose production is deliberately minimal (to discussed more later), it can be assumed that "The Mother" would be able to tour constantly, reaching a wider audience.

So "The Mother" is available to many people, but once an individual is involved in watching the play, what changes did Brecht make to make it more accessible on an intellectual level? Epic Theatre, as stated in Benjamin's "What is Epic Theatre?" concerns the "filling-in of the orchestra pit"¹, reducing the stage to a public exhibition area. The play's audience is "...No longer a collection of hypnotised test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands (the play) must satisfy."²

The reduction of characters to simple verbalizations of different points of view also reduces the audience's tendency to become emotionally involved, and so possibly lose sight of the pedagogic function of the play. Or, as Benjamin writes, "The job of epic theatre ... is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions."³ The action in epic theatre should be arranged so that one may enter at any point and pick up on the goings-on instantly. Also, the technique of interruption is employed for, among other things, reminding the audience to remain objective by having a character enter a situation that makes sense within the story, but not to one who is just entering the action. Brecht's "The Mother", as in other Epic Theatre productions, does not strive for realism. On the contrary, it unpretentiously (and self-

consciously) continually reminds the viewer that he is indeed in a theatre and indeed watching a play to gain knowledge. It does this through its unrealistic production--minimal, functional sets, and, as stated above, unrealistically one dimensional dialogue (although it can be argued that its production is the most realistic of all in the sense that it is realistically and obviously produced as a play (more on this concept below)).

Thus far we have stated that "The Mother" and epic theatre in general consists of concise, didactic plays with minimal production, and available to many people who are interested in being instructed in a specific area, with functional repercussions. Indeed, Benjamin says that "Epic Theatre casts doubt upon the notion that theatre is entertainment"⁴. It now seems the whole idea of the "theatre" simply gets in the way. What seems to be a more direct route to the same ends is speechmaking.

Imagine a political rally; thousands of people gathered together, listening without payment; passers-by finding themselves interested--an interruption of their day-to-day routine, in which they can objectively reflect on their condition because of their presence in a new and alien situation in which their condition is being re-evaluated. People will come and go at will, not feeling they've missed anything if they come in the middle because there are many speechmakers all concentrating on the issues at hand, providing their own slightly personal point-of-view. There are no walls, no "orchestra pit" between the speechmakers and the crowd; speechmakers are involved in the political struggle, otherwise they would not be present. Constant chanting, like choruses, concisely convey the beliefs and goals of the throng.

This scene, it would seem, has all the necessary elements of Epic Theatre save the fact that it is not set in a theatre, but in reality. And since Epic Theatre strives to eliminate the pretentious deception of reality in theatre, why can not it be eliminated altogether?

We can take this extension one step further. Imagine a married couple that believes a proletarian revolution is necessary. They raise their children as Marxists and live the lives of non- activist Marxists in a village of a capitalistic society. When in public, townspeople notice the ways of this Marxist family. Their lifestyle is apparent to all who come in contact with them. Their beliefs are most apparent in what they say, obviously, but their actions also imply their beliefs. They are educating by example via the truest form--the art of living. The family interrupts the normal flow of things, anytime, anywhere, simply by their presence. They present the townspeople with an alternative lifestyle and help them look objectively at their own.

This scenario also contains all the elements of epic theatre, yet it is obviously not in any way theatrical. Could the truest form of (well, we can no longer call it Epic Theatre) conveying what is intended by Epic Theatre be the actions of the conceptual artist? If so, it can therefore be argued that the way to achieve the most radical change in society through an artistic statement is through relative inaction; through displaying beliefs not through a book, as Gorky's Mother"

does, or on a stage, as Brecht's "The Mother" does, but through an unpretentious, unselfconscious, zen-ful approach to art, life, and change.

Source:

Benjamin, Walter, What Is Epic Theatre?

Notes:

1 Benjamin, p.1

2 Ibid. p.2

3 Ibid. p.4

4 Ibid. p.9