

Realism, once intended as an antidote to the drama that preceded it, was itself challenged by subsequent theater artists. Even as Ibsen was writing his realistic social dramas, Expressionism was being cultivated in Sweden and Germany. It paved the way for Brecht's epic theater, and soon other "Isms"—Surrealism, Formalism, Futurism—would usurp realism's hold on the modern theater. Of these antirealist movement, Expressionism and the epic theater have enjoyed the greatest longevity and subsequent influence.

Expressionism

As effective as he was in his naturalistic works, Strindberg's greatest achievements can be found in his experimental works, notably a series of Expressionist dramas such as *A Dream Play* (1903) and *The Ghost (or Spook) Sonata* (1907). The titles of these works suggest an unreal, dreamlike, or, more accurately, nightmarish depiction of human existence. Strindberg and the subsequent Expressionists sought to portray subjective states of the human mind realistically. This is, of course, a contradiction in terms (have you ever tried to explain a dream to someone?). Nonetheless, the Expressionists attempted to construct authentic dream worlds onstage through the use of distorted scenic pictures, bizarre lighting effects, dialogue that defied logic, and nonrealistic acting. Strindberg defines some of the characteristics of Expressionistic drama in notes accompanying *A Dream Play*, which he wrote to

imitate the incoherent but ostensibly logical form of our dreams. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. Working with some insignificant real events as a background, the imagination spins out its threads of thoughts and weaves them into new patterns—a mixture of memories, experiences, spontaneous ideas, impossibilities and improbabilities. The characters split, double, multiply, dissolve, condense, float apart, coalesce. But one mind stands over and above them all, the mind of the dreamer.

Expressionism thrived in Germany during the early years of the twentieth century (1910–1924), partly as a means by which young writers, disillusioned by World War I, could attack the old order. Unlike Strindberg, who sought to project “dream states” onstage, the German Expressionists resorted to an intense subjectivism—that is, externalization of their most private inner feelings—to illustrate their outrage at a society that had betrayed them. German Expressionism used characters to symbolize abstractions of social vices rather than psychological realities, lyrical dialogue that superseded the logic of plot, and scenery that reflected purely subjective realities in concrete terms. Writers such as Frank Wedekind, Georg Kaiser, Paul Kornfeld, and Karl Sternheim represent the best of German Expressionism. Bertolt Brecht inherited their tradition when he entered the theater in the 1920s.

Expressionism had an impact on early cinema, such as the great German films *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* and *Metropolis*. The tricks of the moviemaker—crosscuts, dissolves, superimpositions, and bizarre camera angles—lent themselves to Expressionistic storytelling. Some of the most admired American playwrights, including O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, freely used Expressionist elements in their dramas. Expressionism also did much to restore theatricality and poetry to drama that was becoming increasingly obsessed with putting real life onstage.

The Epic Theater

The creativity of the early German Expressionists notwithstanding, it was Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) who most transformed the German and consequently Western theater. It can be argued that Brecht is the most influential artist in the modern theater. He radically altered the means by which artists use the theater as a political instrument. Today we frequently employ the term “Brechtian” to denote a particular style that can be found in both Western (e.g., *Angels in America*) and non-Western (e.g., *Woza Albert!*) dramas, musical theater (e.g., *Cabaret*),

and even opera (e.g., *Nixon in China*). Even classical plays have been presented in a Brechtian style (e.g., the Royal Shakespeare Company's acclaimed 1963 production of the *Henry VI* cycle). Although it might be argued with good reason that Brecht initiated "postmodern" theater (see Chapter 6), he was, like Ibsen and Shaw, committed to transforming society through didactic theater, and he is discussed within the context of modern drama.

Brecht began writing for the theater at the height of the German Expressionist movement in 1922. He was not so much an antirealist as he was against any form of drama that sought to engage an audience's emotions. For Brecht, this traditional approach—which he called the Aristotelian or dramatic theater—erred on two counts:

- An audience aroused to an emotional state might not make rational decisions that could amend the problem presented in the play;
- By solving the problem onstage, the audience might not feel compelled to attack the problem in the streets.

Brecht's solution was an "epic theater," which would

not only release the feelings, insights, and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but [employ] and [encourage] those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.

The epic theater rejected the Aristotelian catharsis, which implied a release of emotions. Instead, he sought to use the stage to provoke audiences into action. Specifically, the theater must "criticize constructively from a social point of view." Brecht constructed the following comparison between his epic theater and the dramatic theater:

Dramatic Theater

plot
 implicates spectator in stage situation
 wears down his capacity for action
 provides him with sensations
 experience
 spectator is involved in something
 suggestion
 instinctive feelings are preserved
 spectator is in the thick of it,
 shares the experience
 human being is taken for granted
 eyes on the finish
 one scene makes another
 growth
 linear development
 evolutionary determinism
 man as a fixed point
 thought determines being
 feeling

Epic Theater

narrative
 turns spectator into an observer
 arouses his capacity for action
 forces him to make decisions
 picture of the world
 spectator is made to face something
 argument
 brought to point of recognition
 spectator stands outside,
 studies the experience
 human being is the subject of inquiry
 eyes on the course
 each scene for itself
 montage
 in curves (ups/down)
 jumps
 man as a process
 social being determines thought
 reason*

To discourage the audience's emotional involvement with the characters, Brecht developed the *Verfremdungseffekt* ("alienation effect"), which is derived from the German verb *verfremden* ("to make strange"). In Brechtian terms, the "A-effect" (as it is now called) challenges audi-

*From "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic" by Bertolt Brecht, from *Brecht on Theatre*, edited and translated by John Willet, © 1964. Reprinted by permission of Methuen Publishing, Ltd.

ences to see a social problem as if for the first time, evaluate the issues, and devise solutions to correct it. Hence, the epic theater is didactic because it educates and arouses an audience to action, however entertaining its means.

To achieve the A-effect, Brecht resorted to a purposeful theatricality that reminds audiences that they are only watching a play, not real life. He admits the influence of such diverse and nonrealistic entertainments as folk plays, medieval dramas, cabaret and vaudeville, the films of Charlie Chaplin, Elizabethan stagecraft, court trials, and even boxing matches. Brecht returned the theater to the art of storytelling, frequently using narrators or singers to tell episodic tales. Between episodes, Brecht inserted speeches, songs, and visual devices such as signboards to instruct audiences about the play's intent. He rejected romantic lighting in favor of harsh, white lighting (inspired by the boxing arena) to "illuminate" the action; he rejected pretty scenery in favor of curtains that merely suggested locale and ambience; and he rejected beautiful costumes in favor of worn, used clothing made by the proletariat. Ironically, his costumes were quite often realistic.

Primarily, Brecht used *historification* to show how time and people can change societies and institutions. He set his plays in remote times and places. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Brecht places his exposé of modern capitalism in provincial China. In every case he asks his audiences to judge the "pastness" of an action that clearly parallels a modern situation. Brecht was, of course, borrowing from earlier theater traditions, most notably the medieval and Elizabethan theaters, which also used history as a parallel for contemporary social problems.

Not only did Brecht—and those whom he inspired—revolutionize playwriting, he offered an alternative to realistic acting. Whereas Stanislavskian actors sought to identify with their characters through introspection and psychological motivation, Brechtian actors were taught to "quote" their characters' social essence (a boss, a worker, the oppressed, a soldier, etc.). If the Stanislavskian actor used a superobjective to get at a character's soul, the Brechtian actor defined character in terms of its *gestus* (i.e., social function). Brecht was influenced by Chinese actors he saw in Moscow in 1935, especially the great Mei Lan-fang, a man whose specialty was female roles. Brecht noted that Chinese actors sought not to become their characters, but rather to manifest the social essence of their characters.

Brecht has often been accused of being antiemotional, yet a look at his plays (especially *Mother Courage*, in which a mother loses three children to the war) suggests that he could summon up an audience's emotions as well as any "dramatic" playwright. Brecht frequently employs traditional devices, particularly those of the melodrama, to arouse emotions in his audience. However, he "short-circuits" the emotional response to keep audiences from achieving the catharsis of the Aristotelian theater (which Brecht called "barbaric" because it allowed the slaughter of noble beings like Oedipus). At an emotional crest, Brecht inserted one of his A-effects—a speech, joke, or signboard—to challenge audiences to evaluate why they felt so strongly about the issues. He asked them to consider alternatives to the social problems that created the dilemma. As you read *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *No saca nada de la escuela*, *Top Girls*, and *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* you will observe these theories in practice.