

A STUDY ON BRECHT

WHAT IS EPIC THEATRE?*

[FIRST VERSION]

The point at issue in the theatre today can be more accurately defined in relation to the stage than to the play. It concerns the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama, whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera, this abyss which, of all the elements of the stage, most indelibly bears the traces of its sacral origins, has lost its function. The stage is still elevated, but it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth; it has become a public platform. Upon this platform the theatre now has to install itself. That is the situation. But, as happens in many situations, here too the business of disguising it has prevailed over its proper realization. Tragedies and operas go on and on being written, apparently with a trusty stage apparatus to hand, whereas in reality they do nothing but supply material for an apparatus which is obsolete. 'This confusion among musicians, writers and critics about their situation has enormous consequences which receive far too little attention. Believing themselves to be in possession of an apparatus which in

* Bibliographical details of where these essays were first published are given on page 123.

reality possesses them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have control, which is no longer, as they still believe, a means *for* the producers but has become a means to be used against the producers.' With these words Brecht dispels the illusion that theatre today is based on literature. That is true neither for the commercial theatre nor for his own. In both, the text is the servant: in the former it serves to keep the business going, in the latter to change it. How is such change possible? Is there such a thing as drama for the public platform – for that is what the stage has become – or, as Brecht says, for 'public propaganda institutes'? And if so, what is its nature? The only possibility of doing justice to the public platform appeared to have been found by the 'theatre of current events', the *Zeittheater*, in the form of political plays. But however this political theatre functioned, socially it promoted the occupation by the proletarian masses of the very positions which the apparatus of the theatre had created for the bourgeois masses. The functional relationship between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors, remained almost unchanged. Epic theatre takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into these relationships. For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area. For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy. For its text, the performance is no longer a virtuoso interpretation, but its rigorous control. For its performance, the text is no longer a basis of that performance, but a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performance are marked. For its actor, the producer no longer gives him instructions about effects, but theses for comment. For its producer, the actor is no longer a mime who must embody a role, but a functionary who has to make an inventory of it.

Clearly, functions thus changed must be founded on changed elements. A recent (1931) Berlin performance of Brecht's parable *A Man's a Man* offered the best opportunity to test this. Thanks to the courageous and intelligent assiduity of Legal, the theatre direc-

tor, this was not only one of the most precisely studied productions seen in Berlin for years; it was also a model of epic theatre, the only one so far. What prevented the professional critics from recognizing this fact will be seen in due course. The public found Brecht's comedy perfectly accessible – once the sultry atmosphere of the first night had cleared – without help from any professional criticism. For the difficulties encountered by epic theatre in achieving recognition are, after all, nothing other than an expression of its closeness to real life, while theory languishes in the Babylonian exile of a praxis which has nothing to do with the way we live. Thus, the values of an operetta by Kolla lend themselves more readily to definition in the approved language of aesthetics than those of a play by Brecht, especially since such a play, in order totally to dedicate itself to the construction of the new theatre, allows itself a free hand with literature.

Epic theatre is gestural. The extent to which it can also be literary in the traditional sense is a separate issue. The gesture is its raw material and its task is the rational utilization of this material. The gesture has two advantages over the highly deceptive statements and assertions normally made by people and their many-layered and opaque actions. First, the gesture is falsifiable only up to a point; in fact, the more inconspicuous and habitual it is, the more difficult it is to falsify. Second, unlike people's actions and endeavours, it has a definable beginning and a definable end. Indeed, this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture. This leads to an important conclusion: the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain. Hence, the interrupting of action is one of the principal concerns of epic theatre. Therein lies the formal achievement of Brecht's songs with their crude, heart-rending refrains. Without anticipating the difficult study, yet to be made, of the function of the text in epic theatre, we can at least say that often its main function is not to illustrate or advance the action but, on the contrary, to interrupt it: not only the action of others,

but also the action of one's own. It is the retarding quality of these interruptions and the episodic quality of this framing of action which allows gestural theatre to become epic theatre.

The job of epic theatre, it has been explained, is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions. Most of the slogans of the dramaturgy of epic theatre have been ignored but this one has, at least, created a misunderstanding. Reason enough to take it up. Those 'conditions' which had to be represented were thought to be the equivalent of the 'milieu', or social setting, of earlier theoreticians. Thus understood, the demand meant no more than a plea for a return to naturalistic drama. Yet no one can be naive enough to champion such a return. The naturalistic stage is in no sense a public platform; it is entirely illusionistic. Its own awareness that it is theatre cannot fertilize it; like every theatre of unfolding action, it must repress this awareness so as to pursue undistracted its aim of portraying the real. Epic theatre, by contrast, incessantly derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it is theatre. This consciousness enables it to treat elements of reality as though it were setting up an experiment, with the 'conditions' at the end of the experiment, not at the beginning. Thus they are not brought closer to the spectator but distanced from him. When he recognizes them as real conditions it is not, as in naturalistic theatre, with complacency, but with astonishment. This astonishment is the means whereby epic theatre, in a hard, pure way, revives a Socratic praxis. In one who is astonished, interest is born: interest in its primordial form. Nothing is more characteristic of Brecht's way of thinking than the attempt which epic theatre makes to transform this primordial interest directly into a technical, expert one. Epic theatre addresses itself to interested persons 'who do not think unless they have a reason to'. But that is an attitude absolutely shared by the masses. Brecht's dialectical materialism asserts itself unmistakably in his endeavour to interest the masses in theatre as technical experts, but not at all by way of 'culture'. 'In this way we could very soon have a theatre full of experts, as we have sports stadiums full of experts.'

Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. This uncovering of conditions is brought about

through processes being interrupted. A very crude example: a family row. The mother is just about to pick up a pillow to hurl at the daughter, the father is opening a window to call a policeman. At this moment a stranger appears at the door. 'Tableau', as they used to say around 1900. In other words: the stranger is suddenly confronted with certain conditions: rumpled bedclothes, open window, a devastated interior. But there exists a view in which even the more usual scenes of bourgeois life appear rather like this. The more far-reaching the devastations of our social order (the more these devastations undermine ourselves and our capacity to remain aware of them), the more marked must be the distance between the stranger and the events portrayed. We know such a stranger from Brecht's *Versuche*: a Swabian 'Utis', a counterpart of Ulysses, the Greek 'Nobody' who visits one-eyed Polyphemus in his cave. Similarly Keuner – that is the stranger's name – penetrates into the cave of the one-eyed monster whose name is 'class society'. Like Ulysses he is full of guile, accustomed to suffering, much-travelled; both men are wise. A practical resignation which has always shunned utopian idealism makes Ulysses think only of returning home; Keuner never leaves the threshold of his house at all. He likes the trees which he sees in the yard when he comes out of his fourth-floor tenement flat. 'Why don't you ever go into the woods,' ask his friends, 'if you like trees so much?' 'Did I not tell you,' replies Herr Keuner, 'that I like the trees in my yard?' To move this thinking man, Herr Keuner (who, Brecht once suggested, should be carried on stage lying down, so little is he drawn thither), to move him to existence upon the stage – that is the aim of this new theatre. It will be noticed, not without surprise, that its origins reach back a very long time. For the fact is that ever since the Greeks, the search for the untragic hero on the European stage has never ceased. Despite all the classical revivals, the great dramatists have always kept as far away as possible from the authentic Greek figure of tragedy. This is not the place to trace the path which winds through the Middle Ages, in Hroswitha and the mystery plays, or later, in Gryphius, Lenz and Grabbe, or to show how Goethe crossed it in the second *Faust*. But we may say that this path was a specially German one. If, that is, one can speak

of a path at all, rather than an overgrown stalking-track along which the legacy of medieval and baroque drama has crept down to us over the sublime but barren massif of classicism. This track reappears today, rough and untended as it may be, in the plays of Brecht. The untragic hero is part of this German tradition. That his paradoxical stage existence has to be redeemed by our own actual one was recognized at an early date; not, of course, by the critics, but by the best contemporary thinkers such as Georg Lukács and Franz Rosenzweig. Plato, Lukács wrote twenty years ago, already recognized the undramatic nature of the highest form of man, the sage. And yet in his dialogues he brought him to the threshold of the stage. One may regard epic theatre as more dramatic than the dialogue (it is not always): but epic theatre need not, for that reason, be any the less philosophical.

The forms of epic theatre correspond to the new technical forms - cinema and radio. Epic theatre corresponds to the modern level of technology. In film, the theory has become more and more accepted that the audience should be able to 'come in' at any point, that complicated plot developments should be avoided and that each part, besides the value it has for the whole, should also possess its own episodic value. For radio, with its public which can freely switch on or off at any moment, this becomes a strict necessity. Epic theatre introduces the same practice on the stage. For epic theatre, as a matter of principle, there is no such thing as a latecomer. The implications of this suggest that epic theatre's challenge to the theatre as a social institution is far more serious than any damage it may inflict on the theatre as entertainment industry. Whereas, in cabaret, the bourgeoisie mingle with bohemia and, in variety, the gap between petty and big bourgeoisie is bridged for the space of an evening, the habitués of Brecht's theatre, where cigarette smoke is caught in the projector beam, are proletarians. For them there is nothing strange about Brecht's instruction to an actor to play the choosing of a wooden leg by the beggar in the *Three penny Opera* in such a way that 'just for the sake of seeing this particular turn people will plan to revisit the show at the precise moment it occurs'. Neher's back-

projections for such 'turns' are far more like posters than stage decorations. The poster is a constituent element of 'literarized' theatre. 'Literarizing entails punctuating "representation" with "formulation"; gives the theatre the possibility of making contact with other institutions for intellectual activities.'* These institutions (media) even include books. 'Footnotes, and the habit of turning back in order to check a point, need to be introduced into play-writing too.'

But what is it that Neher's posters advertise? Brecht writes that they 'adopt an attitude towards events in such a way that the real glutton in Mahagonny sits in front of the depicted glutton'. Very well. Who can say that the acted glutton is more real than the depicted one? We can make the acted one sit in front of the more real one, i.e. we can let the depicted one at the back be more real than the acted one. Perhaps it is only now that we obtain a clue to the powerful and curious effect of scenes staged in this way. Some of the players appear as mandatories of the larger forces which, remaining in the background, are like Plato's Ideas in that they constitute the ideal model of things. Neher's back-projections, however, are materialist ideas; they relate to genuine 'conditions'; even when they approximate to actual events, the tremulousness of their contours still suggests the far greater and more intimate proximity from which they have been wrenched in order to become visible.

The literarization of theatre by means of verbal formulas, posters, captions, is intended to, and will, 'make what is shown on the stage unsensational'. (Brecht is fully aware of the connections between these methods and certain practices of Chinese theatre, a connection which we will examine at some future date.) Brecht goes still further in the same direction by asking himself whether the events portrayed by the epic actor ought not to be known in advance. 'In that case historical events would, on the face of it, be the most suitable.' One must, however, expect the dramatist to take a certain amount of licence in that he will tend to emphasize not the great decisions

* *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett, Hill and Wang, New York, 1964, pp. 43-4 (Translator's note).

which lie along the main line of history but the incommensurable and the singular. 'It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way' – that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre. His relation to his story is like that of a ballet teacher to his pupil. His first aim is to loosen her joints to the very limits of the possible. He will be as far removed from historical and psychological clichés as Strindberg in his historical dramas. For Strindberg made a strongly conscious attempt at epic, untragic theatre. In the works concerned with individual lives he still goes back to the Christian schema of the Passion; but in his histories the vehemence of his critical thought and his irony with its unmasking effect pave the way for epic theatre. In this sense, the Calvary play *To Damascus* and the morality play *Gustavus Adolphus* are the twin poles of his dramatic writing.

If we adopt the optic which we have just outlined, we can see the productive dichotomy between Brecht and the so-called *Zeitdramatik*, a dichotomy which he tries to overcome in his *Lehrstücke* (didactic plays). These plays are the necessary detour via epic theatre which the play with a thesis must take. The plays of a Toller or a Lampel do not take this detour; exactly like the works of German pseudo-classicism, they 'award primacy to the idea, and all the time make the spectator desire a specific aim, creating, as it were, an ever-increasing demand for the supply'. Such writers attack the conditions in which we live from the outside; Brecht lets the conditions speak for themselves, so that they confront each other dialectically. Their various elements are played off logically against one another. The docker Galy Gay in Brecht's *A Man's a Man* is like an empty stage on which the contradictions of our society are acted out. Following Brecht's line of thought one might arrive at the proposition that it is the wise man who is the perfect stage for such a dialectic. In any case Galy Gay is a wise man. He introduces himself as a docker 'who doesn't drink, smokes very little and hasn't any passions to speak of'. He is not tempted by the offer of sex with the widow whose basket he has carried. 'To be frank, I'd really like to buy some fish.' Yet he is introduced as a man 'who can't say no'. And this too is wise, for he lets the contradictions of existence enter into

the only place where they can, in the last analysis, be resolved: the life of a man. Only the 'consenting' man has any chance of changing the world.

And so it happens that the wise proletarian Galy Gay, the man who keeps himself to himself, agrees to join the berserk ranks of the British colonial army, thereby consenting to the denial of his own wisdom. A moment ago he went out of his front door, sent by his wife on an errand to buy some fish. Now he meets three soldiers of the Anglo-Indian army who have lost a fourth while looting a pagoda. The three of them have their own reasons for finding a replacement for the missing man as soon as possible. Galy Gay is the man who can't say no. He follows the three soldiers without knowing what is in store for him. One by one he adopts thoughts, attitudes, habits such as a soldier in war must possess; when he is completely re-equipped, he won't even recognize his own wife when she eventually succeeds in tracking him down. Finally he becomes the much-feared conqueror of the Tibetan mountain stronghold of So al Dohowr. A man's a man, so a docker is a mercenary. He will treat his self-condition as mercenary no differently from the way he treated his dockerhood. A man's a man: this is not fidelity to any single essence of one's own, but a continual readiness to admit a new essence.

Never give your exact name, what's the point?

When you name yourself you always name another.

Don't be so loud in stating your opinion. Forget it. What
was it again, the opinion you held?

Do not remember things for longer than they last.

Epic theatre casts doubts upon the notion that theatre is entertainment. It shakes the social validity of theatre-as-entertainment by robbing it of its function within the capitalist system. It also threatens the privileges of the critics. These privileges are based on the technical expertise which enables the critic to make certain observations about productions and performances. The criteria he applies in making his observations are only very rarely within his own control; he seldom worries about this, but relies upon 'theatre aesthetics'

in the details of which nobody is particularly interested. If, however, the aesthetic of the theatre ceases to remain in the background, if its forum is the audience and its criterion is no longer the effect registered by the nervous systems of single individuals but the degree to which the mass of spectators becomes a coherent whole, then the critic as he is constituted today is no longer ahead of that mass but actually finds himself far behind it. The moment when the mass begins to differentiate itself in discussion and responsible decisions, or in attempts to discover well-founded attitudes of its own, the moment the false and deceptive totality called 'audience' begins to disintegrate and there is new space for the formation of separate parties within it – separate parties corresponding to conditions as they really are – at that moment the critic suffers the double misfortune of seeing his nature as agent revealed and, at the same time, devalued. Simply by the fact of appealing to an 'audience' – which continues to exist in its old, opaque form only for the theatre, but characteristically, no longer for film – the critic becomes, whether he means to or not, the advocate of what the ancients used to call 'theatrocratia': the use of theatre to dominate the masses by manipulating their reflexes and sensations – the exact opposite of responsible collectives freely choosing their positions. The 'innovations' which such audiences will demand are exclusively concerned with what is realizable within existing society, and are thus the opposite of 'renovations'. Epic theatre attacks the basic view that art may do no more than lightly touch upon experience – the view which grants only to kitsch the right to encompass the whole range of experience, and then only for the lower classes of society. This attack upon the basis is at the same time an assault upon the critics' privileges. And this the critics have sensed; in the debate over epic theatre they must be considered an interested party.

Naturally, such 'self-control' of the stage counts on there being actors whose idea of the audience is essentially different from the animal-tamer's view of the beasts who inhabit his cage: actors for whom effect is not an end but a means. The Russian producer Meyerhold was recently asked in Berlin what in his opinion distinguished his actors from those of Western Europe. He replied:

‘Two things. First, they think; second, they do not think idealistically but materialistically.’ The view that the stage is a moral institution is justified only in relation to a theatre that does not merely transmit knowledge but actually engenders it. In epic theatre the actor’s training consists in acting in such a way that he is oriented towards knowledge; and this knowledge, in turn, determines not only the content but also the *tempi*, pauses and stresses of his whole performance. This should not, however, be understood in the sense of a style. In the programme notes to *A Man’s a Man* we read: ‘In epic theatre the actor has several functions, and according to the particular function he is fulfilling, the style of his acting will change.’ This plurality of possibilities is controlled by a dialectic to which all stylistic considerations have to bow. ‘The actor must show an event, and he must show himself. He naturally shows the event by showing himself, and he shows himself by showing the event. Although these two tasks coincide, they must not coincide to such a point that the contrast (difference) between them disappears.’

‘To make gestures quotable’ is the actor’s most important achievement; he must be able to space his gestures as the compositor produces spaced type. ‘The epic play is a construction that must be viewed rationally and in which things must be recognized; therefore the way it is presented must go half-way to meet such viewing.’ The supreme task of an epic production is to give expression to the relationship between the action being staged and everything that is involved in the act of staging *per se*. The general educational approach of Marxism is determined by the dialectic at work between the attitude of teaching and that of learning: something similar occurs in epic theatre with the constant dialectic between the action which is shown on the stage and the attitude of showing an action on the stage. The first commandment of epic theatre is that ‘the one who shows’ – that is, the actor – ‘shall be shown’. Some will perhaps find that such a formulation is reminiscent of Tieck’s old ‘dramaturgy of reflexion’. To show why this view is mistaken would be to construct a spiral staircase to climb to the rigging-loft of Brechtian theory. It should suffice here to make just one point: for all its skills of reflexion, the Romantic stage never succeeded in doing justice to

the fundamental dialectical relationship between theory and praxis; its struggle to achieve this was, in its way, as vain as that of the *Zeittheater* today.

If, then, the actor on the old stage sometimes found himself, as 'comedian', rubbing shoulders with the priest, in epic theatre he finds himself beside the philosopher. His gesture demonstrates the social significance and applicability of dialectics. It tests conditions on men. The difficulties which a producer meets in rehearsing a play cannot be resolved without concrete understanding of the body of society. But the dialectic which epic theatre sets out to present is not dependent on a sequence of scenes in time; rather, it declares itself in those gestural elements that form the basis of each sequence in time. (These gestural elements are not elemental in the strict sense of the word but only inasmuch as they are simpler than the sequences based upon them.) The thing that is revealed as though by lightning in the 'condition' represented on the stage – as a copy of human gestures, actions and words – is an immanently dialectical attitude. The conditions which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill. For just as, in Hegel, the sequence of time is not the mother of the dialectic but only the medium in which the dialectic manifests itself, so in epic theatre the dialectic is not born of the contradiction between successive statements or ways of behaving, but of the gesture itself.

Twice Galy Gay is summoned to a wall, the first time to change his clothes, the second time to be shot; in both cases the summoning gesture is the same. He himself uses another gesture twice: the first time to renounce the fish he wanted to buy, the second time to accept the elephant. This is the kind of discovery that will satisfy the interest of the audience who frequent epic theatre; it is with discoveries like these that they will get their money's worth. The author, when discussing what distinguishes the epic theatre from the ordinary theatre of entertainment as a more serious art form, is right to point out: 'When we call the other theatre, the one that is hostile to us, merely culinary we create the impression that in our theatre we are against all fun, as though we could not imagine learning or being taught other than as an intensely unpleasurable process. One is often

obliged to weaken one's own position in order to fight an opponent, and to rob one's cause of its breadth and validity for the sake of immediate advantage. Thus reduced purely to fighting form, the cause may win, but it cannot replace what it has defeated. Yet the act of recognizing of which we speak is itself a pleasurable act. The simple fact that man can be recognized in a certain way creates a sense of triumph, and the fact, too, that he can never be recognized completely, never once and for all, that he is not so easily exhaustible, that he holds and conceals so many possibilities within himself (hence his capacity for development), is a pleasurable recognition. That man can be changed by his surroundings and can himself change the surrounding world, i.e. can treat it with consequence, all this produces feelings of pleasure. Not, of course, if man is viewed as something mechanical, something that can be put into a slot, something lacking resistance, as happens today under the weight of certain social conditions. Astonishment, which must here be inserted into the Aristotelian formula for the effects of tragedy, should be considered entirely as a capacity. It can be learned.'

The damming of the stream of real life, the moment when its flow comes to a standstill, makes itself felt as reflux: this reflux is astonishment. The dialectic at a standstill is its real object. It is the rock from which we gaze down into that stream of things which, in the city of Jehoo 'that's always full and where nobody stays', they have a song about:

Rest not on the wave which breaks against your foot,
So long as it stands in the water, new waves will break against it.

But if the stream of things breaks against this rock of astonishment, then there is no difference between a human life and a word. In epic theatre both are only the crest of the wave. Epic theatre makes life spurt up high from the bed of time and, for an instant, hover iridescent in empty space. Then it puts it back to bed.