

Epic Theatre: *Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan*

Epic theatre (E.T) came from Germanic term *episches Theater* as suggestion from Erwin Piscator when he was in his first year as director of Berlin's Volksbühne in 1924. Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) is a theatrical producer and director famed for his ingenious expressionistic staging techniques. He wished the playwrights will address issue related to "contemporary existence." While he was the originator of the epic theatre style, epic theatre later developed by a German playwright, Bertolt Brecht. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) isn't only a playwright-director, but he is also a poet. He became a life-long committed Marxist from his late 20's. Brecht believed that Theatre's greatest function was to educate. Thus, you can call it that the founders of this theory are Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht.

However, despite using the same theory, both practitioners developed their own brand of this radical new theatre form. Brecht's epic theatre filled the stages with few set pieces, signs, visible stage machinery, open white light, and basic costumes. Piscator's theatre, however, utilized full use of technology, huge multi-level sets, ramps, treadmills, and even projection in an expressionistic style.

E.T arose as response to Richard Wagner's idea of "Gesamtkunstwerk", or "total artwork", which intends each piece of art is composed of each other art form. Richard's idea contradicted the idea of Epic Theatre which is focused on the specific relationship between form and content. To put it more simply, it's a reaction against Naturalism. Since at time, E.T came when melodrama, realism, and naturalism were popular as theatre forms. These naturalistic styles tried to recreate real life on stage. The idea was for the audience to believe the story and characters in the play were real. Basically, the theatre aimed to be escapism, meaning so they could forget about their lives. Brecht, the creator of, hated this. He felt that the audiences are wasted that way. Brecht wanted people not only accept and enjoy what they see, but also to question and challenge it.

Initially, epic theatre aimed to politically educate the German working class by using an intellectual mode of delivery with limited emotion. Then it designed to make the audience question and think about what they were watching. He did this by using a technique called *Verfremdungseffekt* (the distancing effect or making something strange) or also known as alienation effects. As the name implied, it was used to direct the audience's attention to something new. This was done by starting a scene then doing something unexpected. When the rhythm is interrupted, for example, the audience will stop getting lost in the emotion, story, or characters. By using this and other variety of effects or techniques, the audiences are constantly reminded that what they watch is only a representation of reality, not a reality itself and they can start think and question on what they watch. The epic play creates a feeling of rebel for the spectator because then, unlike the dramatic audience, they are able to see other options and want to help the character. Because of this, epic plays are didactic. They try to give a message to people about politics, economy or society. They help them to see the reality and question the system and finally change it. For Brecht, this message is usually about capitalist system, and he wants a revolution from the

point of the audience. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is one of these plays in which he questions the capitalist society.

The Good Woman of Setzuan was written between the years of 1938 and 1943 when Brecht was in exile. It sets in Communist China. It's about a parable of a young woman torn among goodness, money, greed and power, between obligation and reality, love and practicality, and between her own needs and those of her friends and neighbors. There is an epilogue and ten acts during which Shen Te, the protagonist, tries to stay good in cruel, capitalist and greedy world. She tries to be good and rich at the same time.

This play is an example of epic drama, and like other theory, epic theatre has its own characteristics. The first characteristic which makes it an epic theatre is its fable. To create a distance and to break the identification, Brecht suggests to use distant places and time as the setting. Even though he talks about the capitalist system in Europe and United States, he uses China as the setting. The names of the characters are also interesting for the European audience since they find it hard to remember and pronounce names like Shen Te, Shui Ta, Yang Sun and so on. This distance helps the audience to criticize and have a critical look over the issue.

The other characteristic of alienation which is important for epic theatre is *asides*. These *asides* are used as an interruption to disturb the audience. Normally in a dramatic play, an actor does not directly talk or address to the audience because he is afraid to lose the illusion of reality. However, in epic dramas, actors directly address to the audience to make them think and find a solution for the problem. The reason is that it is the only way to make them move and revolt. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, there are a lot of examples for these *asides*. For example, Shen Te informs the audience about what happened after the gods left:

Shen Te (*to the audience*): It's three days now since the gods left. When they said they wanted to pay for the room, I looked down at my hand, and there was more than a thousand silver dollars! I bought a tobacco shop with the money, and moved in yesterday. I don't own the building, of course, but I can pay the rent, and I hope to do a lot of good here. (...) (Sc.1,26)

Another important feature which is used by Brecht is the use of songs and verses. There are constant interruptions by the musical interludes. This is done in order to alienate the audience and question the situation, too. There are important questions between the lines as one can see in the verses of Shen Te in Scene 10, when she complains about how to be good and keep surviving.

To sum it, Epic Theatre is a reaction against Naturalism. It aims to not let the audiences only enjoy the play, but also think and question what they watch. In one of the plays, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Brecht applied the characteristics of E.T characteristics. These elements are, as mentioned before: disturbing the audience by asking them questions, breaking the illusion by songs, verses or posters, and giving a distant setting. Thanks to these elements, they are able to see the truth, and they will realize that they can do something to change the system. This is the aim of Brecht while producing epic drama. He tries to break automatized perceptions of people and show them a different world. This is what makes epic drama a didactic work while raising awareness of the society.