



Bertolt Brecht and the Songs in his Dramas: with special reference to Mother Courage and Her Three Children

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Keywords:

Epic theatre; Songs; Alienation; Dramatic technique; Gestus.

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Funding Information:

No funding information provided.

Received:

22 January 2014; Accepted: 07 February 2014

International Journal of Scientific Footprints 2014; 2(1): 22–27

Abstract

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her three Children* which is based on Thirty Years War, is considered by the critics to be the among the playwright's best work and one of the most powerful anti-dramas in history. Also it is regarded as the masterpiece of Brecht's concept of Epic Theatre. This dramatic sub-genre, pioneered by Brecht sought to present theatre that could be viewed with complete detachment. Using the techniques like short, self-contained scenes that prevent cathartic climax, songs and card slogans that interrupt and explain forthcoming action and detached acting that wards off audience identification which is known as 'alienation effects'. He sought to present a cerebral theatrical experience unmarred by emotional judgment. He wanted his audience should think critically and objectively. Keeping this in view, he introduces the songs in the mentioned play.

Introduction

Born in the year 1898 in Germany, Bertolt Brecht is one of the most brilliant practitioners of German theatre. He was an innovative German playwright, theatre director, socialist, poet, dramatist, theoretician who changed the direction of European theatre better to say the world theatre. Influenced by the Elizabethans, Greek-tragedy, fair-grounded entertainments, Chinese, Japanese and Indian theatre he in a sense revolutionized the theatre. His theatrical

theories and stage conventions were a revolt against the contemporary stage practices of the day. Bertolt Brecht termed the modern theatre as Epic Theatre, specifically the concept of 'alienation' and 'gestus'. His stage-craft has created much debate across the world of theatre. He opened up the prospects as how the stage could be used and for what purpose. In 1949, to produce his plays and to embody his theories and of Erwin Piscator, he founded a theatre company, entitled The Berlin Ensemble and these became the influential theatre in post-war Europe. In this

paper an attempt has been made to focus on Brecht's one most specific aspect of Epic Theatre, i.e. the insertion of songs, particularly in his notable drama, *Mother Courage and Her Three Children*. In context of song composition, the critics regard him as the closest equivalent to Shakespeare. To Bertolt Brecht---

"Art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it"

Objectives

- To focus on his merit to insert songs which expound his major ideas, the themes, etc.
- To focus on the uses of song as a device to create 'alienation' between actors and characters on one hand and actors and audience on the other.
- To focus on his aptness to keep the songs completely separate or without fusing them with the dialogues which serve the purpose of 'complex seeing'?

Methodology

The paper offers descriptive and analytical study which is based on secondary data. These were collected from sources like books, journals, magazines, publications, reviews.

Prologue

Brecht regarded the songs of *Mother Courage and her Three Children* as 'musical insertions'. He employed them as important and independent device. The songs which are 11 in total, employed by the dramatist to interrupt the acting which can be called 'verfremdz effect' or alienation or in short 'A'-effect. Most important aspect of Brecht is to be noticed that he neither used the songs as discharge of emotions nor any psychological state but either to focus on the theme of the play or to comment upon incidents; either past or anticipates the future incidents. With the exception of scenes 5 and 11, almost every scene contains a song. The final scenes contain two songs. Almost every character in *Mother Courage and Her Three Children* has been given an individual song. Brecht has definite purpose in introducing these songs in the play and the purpose is already mentioned above, that is, it is one of the chief features of Epic Theatre which generally function as the device to interrupt the action. By the interruption the audience will be able to obtain time to judge and form their opinions regarding the episodes presented to them. *Mother Courage* is the popular name of Anna Fierling, the central character of the soldiers to buy food and drinks from her canteen-wagon as soon they would be killed and

buried. So they should make merriment and mirth before they die---

“It’s mother courage this way come”

In the beginning scene, scene-1, Mother Courage sings a song which contains details of her profession as well as advice for the soldiers whom she caters. Her trade is to sell goods to the soldiers during the war time. She has a wagon and through her song she invites the soldiers to buy goods from her wagon---

“Oh have yer squaddies halt and buy

New boots and claes an aw forbye!

Flearidden sojers who love their loot”

The song has two-fold approach to the war, as it tells of the tragic conditions of the soldiers that they would definitely meet their pathetic end and on the other hand Mother Courage’s joyous spirit as in the outbreak of war she could sell her commodities at high price. Thus the song serves as the ground theme of the play. In this respect the song seems to immediately strike the keynote of the play. Also, the song introduces the protagonist to the audience and links her up with war situation, resulting in ironic interdependence of comments and conflict. The song, besides these, exposes the cynical realism which Mother Courage has adopted as her attitude to life.

In scene-2, Eilif, the elder son of Mother Courage sings “The Song of Fishwife and the Soldier” by the way of entertaining the Commander and accompanies it with a martial sword dance. It tells of the story of a soldier lad who had an ambition to prove his efficiency but subsequently meets his tragic end in the course of war. Eilif in fact, unknowingly predicts his own destiny, that is, his own death though he was always expecting a long heroic life. On the other hand the Fishwife in the story may be interpreted as Mother Courage who is aware of the deaths that soldiers meet. Then we have Yvette Pottier, a minor character whom the playwright has given the “Song of Fraternization” which serves as a piece of autobiography as in the song she narrates her pathetic story of becoming a prostitute due to the betrayal of an army man. He had professed of loving her intensely but in reality he proved to be a fraud. The song has also two-fold aspects---

“May mornings are so bright

But comes the dark May night

The captain shouts “boys, hit the hay”

But one with something on his mind

Knows just the kind of girl to find

We fraternized until the day”

This song also indicates the dramatic purpose, as a warning to Mother Courage's own young daughter against getting involved with a soldier.

In scene -3, there is a song sung by the Chaplain. He sings "The Song of the Hours", recounting the Christ's passion under the torture inflicted upon Him and His execution which is known as the Crucifixion. Here the Chaplain compares the Good Jesus' life with Swiss Cheese, the second child of Mother Courage. His original name is Feyos---

"though he in Christ could find no fault

No sign of treason nor assault

Proceedings yet he would not halt

And sent Jesus to Herod"

The comparison is to an extent too extravagant because the death of Swiss Cheese is much a minor affair comparing to the crucifixion of the Almighty Jesus. Anyway, it is true that goodness in this evil world has of no value. "The song of Great Capitulation" in scene-4 is sung by the protagonist in a flashback mode. The singer tells the audience of her happy bygone days. Thus, it is also like the Yvette's one. It can be termed as autobiographical in tone. She speaks about how she has started life with youthful idealism, self-confidence but had to

surrender herself to the necessity of circumstances and thus compromised with the situation. Here she reveals her bitterness, dejection and anger at her own weakness---

"long long ago, a green beginner

I thought myself a special"

It contains some tragic tension between one's will and social determinism which the protagonist's dramatic career illustrates very poignantly. So, in a way it discusses the central theme of the play.

The other minor characters, like the Cook is also given a song who sings "The Song of Wise and the Good". The Cook sings about the futility of wisdom, bravery, unselfishness and all the virtues of this earth---

"and see before the night descends

The meek are always overrun

And virtue leads us to our wretched ends

Folks do better, who have none"

The Cook designates himself as God loving person and thus the dramatist brings out the irony as from the story it becomes clear what type of a person the Cook is. It has also some symbolic significance as Mother Courage's three children represent three cardinal values which are exposed in the play. Eilif was brave

like Julius Caesar; Swiss Cheese was like honest Socrates and Kattrin, Mother Courage's dumb daughter who was like unselfish Martin. Likewise, then, there are other songs which deepens our sense of tragedy and this occurs in scene-10, "Song of the Shelter and Security". The song is seen as different in comparing with the others; it is an example of dramatic function, a song in the Epic Theatre which is sung by an anonymous voice from within a farmhouse---

"When wild geese go flying

Before the winter storm

The autumn roses dying

We've got a rose bush glowing"

It is tragic in the sense that it offers a contrasting situation. The inmate of the farmhouse is prosperous and well secured and the song expresses the feeling of joy and pride while Mother Courage and her daughter pause and listen the song and well aware of their desolate condition. This creates an acute sense of pain among the audience. Perhaps, Bertolt Brecht here tries to deepen the sense of tragedy in his audience which they consciously or unconsciously experiencing from the beginning. Also it creates a tension due to the contrasting situation between the

comfort of the inmate and the desolate condition of the mother and the daughter.

In the concluding scene, scene-12, we have two songs, a lullaby sung by Mother Courage and a song sung by the soldiers collectively. The lullaby was sung when Kattrin was shot dead by the Catholic soldiers and lying on the ground. Brecht ironically portrays the scene of the mother who was singing a lullaby to her dead child which intensifies the situation---

"aya Papaya

Who sleeps in the hay?

I see your eyes close

One kid lies in Poland

The other, well, who knows?"

Even at the above point, till the end, the mother is unaware of the fact that her other son is also dead. On the other hand, the final song can be stated as an echo of the very first song sang by Mother Courage. The soldiers like Mother Courage are also aware of the fact that they are fighting a futile war and would obtain "nothing out of it". Their end is obvious and of course they would meet a pathetic end. Probably they would die in the course of the war--

“Only a miracle can save us

And miracles have had their day”

Epilogue

In concluding, it can be summarized that Bertolt Brecht achieved a great success as a pioneer of Epic Theatre and in order to make this perfect he introduced various features of the theatre, the songs which are included by Brecht, is one such feature. They are just like the pillars of the drama which strengthen the form. In order to render them dramatically Brecht wanted them to be acted with the voice of the singers. Thus, the songs offer the audience with opportunities to meditate on different perspectives of the play. In words of Bertolt Brecht---

I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but changing it, and apply that to the theatre

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