What Is the Epic Theater? (II)

I. The Relaxed Audience

"There is nothing more pleasant than to lie on a sofa and read a novel," wrote a nineteenth-century narrator, indicating the extent to which a work of fiction can provide relaxation for the reader who is enjoying it. The image of a man attending a theatrical performance is the opposite: one pictures a man who follows the action with every fiber of his being at rapt attention. The concept of the epic theater, originated by Brecht as the theoretician of his poetic practice, emphasizes that this theater seeks an audience which is relaxed and which follows the action without strain. This audience, to be sure, always appears as a collective, and this differentiates it from the reader, who is alone with the text. Also, this audience, being a collective, will usually feel impelled to take a stand promptly. But this stance, according to Brecht, ought to be a well-considered and therefore relaxed one—in short, the stance of people who have an interest in the matter. Two objects are provided for this interest. The first is the action: it has to be of a sort that the audience can validate [*kontrollieren*] at crucial points on the basis of its own experience. The second is the performance: it should be mounted artistically in a transparent manner. (This manner of presentation is anything but artless; in fact, it presupposes artistic sophistication and acumen on the part of the director.) The epic theater appeals to an interest group which "does not think without cause." Brecht never loses sight of the masses, whose limited engagement with thinking is probably alluded to in this phrase. In the endeavor to interest his audience in the theater by an appeal to their expertise, but definitely not by way of mere cultural involvement, a political will has prevailed.

II. The Plot

The epic theater aims to "deprive the stage of the sensation it derives from subject matter." Thus, an old story will often do more for it than a new one. Brecht asks whether it mightn't be better if the incidents presented by the epic theater were already familiar. The theater would have the same relationship to the plot as a ballet teacher has to a student: the teacher's first task would be to loosen the dancer's joints to the greatest possible extent. This is how the Chinese theater actually proceeds. In his essay "The Fourth Wall of China,"[1] Brecht describes what he owes to Chinese theater. If the theater is to cast about for familiar events, "historical incidents would be the most suitable." Their epic extension through a particular style of acting, through placards, and through onstage captions is intended to rid them of the character of sensation.

In this vein, Brecht takes up the life of Galileo as the subject of his latest play.[2] Brecht presents Galileo primarily as a great teacher who not only teaches a new physics, but does so in a new way. In his hands, experiments are not only a scientific achievement but a pedagogical tool. The main emphasis of this play is not on Galileo's recantation; rather, the truly epic method is evident in the headnote to the penultimate scene: "1633 to 1642. As a prisoner of the Inquisition, Galileo continues his scientific work until his death. He succeeds in smuggling his main works out of Italy."

The epic theater has a relation to the passage of time which is entirely different from that of the tragic theater. Because its suspense is a function less of the dénouement than of particular scenes, the epic theater can cover enormous spans of time. (The same is true of the medieval mystery plays. The dramaturgy of *Oedipus* or *The Wild Duck* is the polar opposite of the epic method.)[3]

III. The Untragic Hero

The French classical theater reserved a space close to the players for persons of rank, who sat in armchairs on the open stage. To us, this seems inappropriate. According to familiar notions of "the dramatic," a nonparticipating third party—a dispassionate observer or "thinker"—should not be associated with the action onstage. Yet Brecht often had something like this in mind. One can go still further and say that Brecht undertook to make the thinker, or even the wise man, the hero of the drama. It is from this perspective that one can define his theater as epic theater. The undertaking is at its most advanced in the character of Galy Gay, the packer. Galy Gay, the protagonist of the play *A Man's a Man*,[4] is nothing but a bodying forth of the contradictions which make up our society. One might go so far as to see the "wise man," in the Brechtian sense, as the perfect bodying forth of its dialectics. In any case, Galy Gay is a wise man. Plato long ago recognized the

undramatic quality of that most excellent man, the sage. In his dialogues, he took this figure to the threshold of the drama; in his *Phaedo,* to the threshold of the Passion play. The medieval Christ, who also represented the wise man (we find this in the church fathers), is the untragic hero par excellence.[5] But in Western secular drama, too, the search for the untragic hero has been unceasing. In ways that are ever new, and frequently in conflict with its theoreticians, this drama has differed from the authentic—that is, ancient Greek—form of tragedy. This important but poorly marked road, which may here serve as the image of a tradition, wound its way through the Middle Ages in the works of Roswitha and the mystery plays, and through the Baroque period in the works of Gryphius and Calderón; later it can be traced in Lenz and Grabbe, and finally in Strindberg.[6] Scenes in Shakespeare are its roadside monuments, and Goethe crosses it in the second part of *Faust.* It is a European road, but a German one as well—if indeed we can say that the legacy of medieval and Baroque drama has reached us by a road, and not by some obscure smugglers' path. It is this mule track, neglected and overgrown, which in our day comes to light in the dramas of Brecht.

IV. The Interruption

Brecht distinguishes his epic theater from dramatic theater in the narrower sense, whose theory was formulated by Aristotle. Appropriately, Brecht introduces his art of the drama as non-Aristotelian, just as Riemann introduced a non-Euclidian geometry.[7] This analogy helps to show that what is at issue is not competition between the theatrical forms in question. Riemann eliminated the parallel postulate; Brecht's drama eliminates the Aristotelian catharsis, the purging of the emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero.

What is unique about the relaxed interest which the epic theater tries to evoke in its audience is that hardly any appeal is made to the viewer's empathy. The art of the epic theater consists in producing not empathy but astonishment. In a word: instead of identifying with the protagonist, the audience should learn to feel astonished at the circumstances under which he functions.

The task of the epic theater, according to Brecht, is less the development of the action than the representation of situations. "Representation" [*Darstellung*] here does not mean "reproduction" as the theoreticians of Naturalism understood it.[8] Rather, the truly important thing is to discover the situations for the first time. (One might equally well say "defamiliarize" them.)[9] This discovery (or defamiliarization) of situations is fostered through interruption of the action. The most basic example would be a family scene that is suddenly interrupted by the entrance of a stranger. The

mother is just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at her daughter; the father is in the act of opening a window in order to call a policeman. At this moment, the stranger appears in the doorway. "Tableau" is what it would have been called around 1900. In other words, the stranger is confronted with the situation: troubled faces, an open window, the furniture in disarray. But there is a gaze before which even more ordinary scenes of middle-class life look almost equally startling.

V. The Quotable Gesture [*Gestus*]

In one of his didactic poems on dramatic art, Brecht says: "The effect of every sentence was anticipated and laid bare. And the anticipation was prolonged until the audience had carefully weighed the sentences." In short, the play was interrupted. We can extend this thought in recalling that interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. Quoting a text entails interrupting its context. It is therefore understandable that the epic theater, being based on interruption, is, in a specific sense, a quotable form of drama. There is nothing special about the quotability of its texts. The difference lies in the gestures which are built into the play.

"Making gestures quotable" is one of the signal achievements of the epic theater. An actor must be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter spaces type. This effect may be achieved, for instance, when an actor quotes his own gesture on the stage. Thus, in *Happy End* we saw Carola Neher,[10] playing a sergeant in the Salvation Army, sing a proselytizing song in a sailors' tavern—where it was more appropriate than it would have been in a church—and later quote this song and act out the gestures before a council of the Salvation Army. Similarly, in *The Measure Taken*[11] the party tribunal not only receives the report of the comrades but also sees some of the gestures of the accused comrade acted out. A device that is extremely subtle in the epic theater becomes a forthright aim in the specific case of the didactic play. Epic theater is by definition a gestic theater. For the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in acting, the more gestures result.

VI. The Didactic Play

The epic theater is always meant for the actors as much as for the spectators. The didactic play is a special case largely because it facilitates and suggests the interchange between audience and actors, and vice versa, through an extreme economy of theatrical devices. Every spectator can become a participant. And it is easier to play the "teacher" than the "hero."

In the first version of *Lindbergh's Flight,* which appeared in a periodical, the flier was still presented as a hero. That version strove to glorify him. The

second version—and this is revealing—was written after Brecht revised his ideas.[12] What enthusiasm there was on both continents in the days following that flight! But the enthusiasm petered out as a mere sensation. *The Flight of the Lindberghs* is an exercise in refraction in which Brecht uses the spectrum of the "singular experience" [*Erlebnis*] as a source for the hues of "experience" [*Erfahrung*]—the experience that could be obtained only from Lindbergh's effort, not from the public's excitement, and that was to be transmitted to his work on "the Lindberghs."

T. E. Lawrence, the author of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* wrote to Robert Graves when he joined the air force that such a step was for modern man what entering a monastery was for medieval man. In this remark we perceive the same tension that appears in *The Flight of the Lindberghs* and Brecht's later didactic plays. A clerical sternness is applied to instruction in modern techniques—here, those of aviation; later, those of class struggle. The latter application can be seen most clearly in *Mother.*[13] It was particularly daring of Brecht to divorce social drama from the empathetic response that audiences were used to. He knew this, and said so in an epistolary poem that he sent to a workingmen's theater in New York when *Mother* was produced there. "We have been asked: Will a worker understand this? Will he be able to do without his accustomed intoxicant: his mental participation in someone else's uprising, the rise of others—the illusion that whips him up for a few hours and leaves him all the more exhausted, filled with vague memories and even vaguer hopes?"

VII. The Actor

Like the images in a film, the epic theater moves in spurts. Its basic form is that of the shock with which the individual, well-defined situations of a play collide. The songs, the captions, the gestic conventions set off one situation from another. This creates intervals which, if anything, undermine the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are provided so that the audience can respond critically to the player's actions and the way they are presented. Regarding the manner of presentation, the actor's task in the epic theater is to demonstrate through his acting that he is cool and relaxed. He has virtually no use for empathy either. The "player" in conventional dramatic theater is not always fully prepared for this kind of acting. Perhaps the most open-minded approach to epic theater is to think of it in terms of "putting on a show."

Brecht wrote: "The actor must show his subject, and he must show himself. Of course, he shows his subject by showing himself, and he shows himself by showing his subject. Although the two tasks coincide, they must not coincide in such a way that the difference between them disappears." In other words, an actor should reserve to himself the possibility of stepping

out of character artistically. At the proper moment, he should insist on portraying an individual who reflects on his part. It would be wrong to think at such a moment of Romantic irony, as employed by Tieck in his *Puss in Boots.*[14] Romantic irony has no didactic aim. Basically, it demonstrates only the philosophical sophistication of the author who, in writing his plays, always keeps in mind that the world may ultimately prove to be a theater.

The extent to which artistic and political interests coincide in the epic theater is evident in the style of acting appropriate to this genre. A case in point is Brecht's cycle *The Private Life of the Master Race.*[15] Obviously, if a German actor in exile were assigned the part of an SS man or a member of the *Volksgericht,*[16] his feelings about it would be quite different from those of a devoted father and husband asked to portray Molière's Don Juan.[17] For the former, empathy can hardly be seen as an appropriate method, since he presumably cannot identify with the murderers of his comrades-in-arms. A different mode of performance—one based on distancing—would in such cases be more fitting, and perhaps more successful. This is the epic mode.

VIII. Theater on a Dais

The aims of the epic theater can be defined more easily in terms of the stage than in terms of a new form of drama. Epic theater takes account of a circumstance that has been generally overlooked. It might be called the filling in of the orchestra pit. This abyss, which separates the players from the audience as though separating the dead from the living; this abyss, whose silence in a play heightens the sublimity, whose resonance in an opera heightens the intoxication; this abyss, which of all the theater's elements is the one that bears the most indelible traces of its origin in ritual, has steadily decreased in significance. The stage is still raised, but it no longer rises from unfathomable depths. It has become a dais. The didactic play and the epic theater are attempts to take a seat on this dais.

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Notes

1. *Life and Letters Today,* 15, no. 6 (1936). [Benjamin's note]
2. Brecht completed the first version of *Leben des Galilei* (Life of Galileo) in 1938.
3. Mystery plays were medieval dramatic representations of biblical events, especially in the life of Jesus. Originating in church liturgy, they were later presented by craft guilds on improvised platforms or wagons in public places. *Oedipus Rex* (ca. 430 B.C.), by Sophocles, and *The Wild Duck* (1884), by Henrik Ibsen, both exemplify the classical ideal of unity of action.

4. Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* was first performed in 1926 and in a revised form, with music by Kurt Weill, in 1931 (with Peter Lorre in the role of Galy Gay). The first version was published in 1927, the second in 1938.
5. Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* gives an account of the last hours of Socrates. A Passion play is a dramatic performance, of medieval origin, that represents the events associated with the Passion of Jesus. The church fathers were authoritative writers in the early Christian church who formulated doctrines and codified religious observances.
6. Roswitha was a tenth-century German Benedictine nun, poet, and chronicler, the author of the chronicles of Otto I (in verse) and of six comedies in Latin. Andreas Gryphius (1616–1664) was the preeminent German dramatist of the seventeenth century. Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), Spanish dramatist, was the last important figure of the Spanish Golden Age. He is best known today for his philosophical dramas, such as *El mágico prodigioso* (The Wonderful Magician) and *La vida es sueño* (Life Is a Dream), which deal with the themes of fate, prognostication, and free will. J. M. R. Lenz (1751–1792) was a German dramatist, poet, and critic. He is best known for his plays *Der Hofmeister* (The Tutor; 1774) and *Die Soldaten* (The Soldiers; 1776), and for critical works, notably *Anmerkungen übers Theater* (Remarks on the Theater; 1774). He is a principal representative of the Sturm und Drang movement. Christian Dietrich Grabbe (1801–1836), German dramatist and journalist, is best known for his comedies, such as *Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung* (Comedy, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Meaning; 1822) and *Don Juan und Faust* (1829). August Strindberg (1849–1912) wrote novels and plays, including *Miss Julie* (1888) and *The Dance of Death* (1901), which are noted for their psychological realism and which marked the beginning of modern Swedish literature.
7. Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann (1826–1866), German mathematician, made significant contributions to the theory of the functions of complex variables. He laid the foundations for a non-Euclidean system of geometry (Riemannian geometry), thus creating the basic tools for the mathematical expression of the general theory of relativity.
8. Naturalism was a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement in literature and graphic art that extended the tradition of Realism, aiming at an even more faithful representation of ordinary reality, a "slice of life" presented without moral judgment. Naturalist works often depicted working class milieus. Its leading exponent was the French novelist Emile Zola, whose treatise *Le Roman expérimental* (The Experimental Novel; 1880) became the literary manifesto of the movement.
9. Benjamin refers to the well-known "alienation effect" of Brechtian dramaturgy. See Brecht's essay of 1936 "Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst," translated by John Willett as "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 91–99. According to Brecht, the "A-effect" depends on the actor's performing "in such a way that nearly every sentence could be followed by a verdict of the audience and practically every gesture is submitted for the public's approval" (95).
10. Carola Neher (1905–1942) was a German actress who starred in several Brecht plays, including *The Threepenny Opera,* in which she played the part of Polly Peachum. She left Germany in 1934 to live in Moscow, where her employment opportunities were limited. In 1937 she was condemned by a Stalinist court to ten years in a labor camp, where she died of typhus. *Happy End* (Brecht's original title), with music by Kurt Weill, was performed and published in 1929.
11. *Die Massnahme,* a *Lehrstück* (didactic play) with music by Hanns Eisler, was first performed in 1930 and published in 1931.
12. The first version of Brecht's work on Charles Lindbergh, *Der Lindberghflug,* with music by Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith, was performed at the Baden-Baden music festival in 1929, subsequently broadcast on German radio, and published as "Lindbergh: Ein Radio-Hörspiel für die Festwoche in Baden-Baden," in *Uhu,* 5, no. 7 (April 1929): 10–16. This version celebrated the charismatic figure of the American flier who had made the first nonstop solo flight over the Atlantic in 1927. In a second version, entitled *Der Flug der Lindberghs: Radiolehrstück für Knaben und Mädchen* (The Flight of the Lindberghs: A Didactic Radio Play for Boys and Girls; broadcast and published 1930), Brecht sought to shift the emphasis from the individual figure to the work process involved in the event. During the next two decades, Brecht became angry at Lindbergh's isolationist stance and his fascination with Nazi social and technological engineering, and after the war he produced a third version of the text (1950) in which he restored his original working title, *Der Ozeanflug* (The Flight across the Ocean), and removed all mention of Lindbergh's name.
13. *Die Mutter,* a didactic play *(Lehrstück)* with music by Hanns Eisler, was adapted from Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother* (1907). It was first performed in 1932 and published in 1933.
14. Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), German Romantic novelist and dramatist, was a leader of the Romantic movement. He is best known for the novel *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (The Wanderings of Franz Sternbald; 1798), one of the first German Romantic novels, and for his fairy tales and folk tales, notably *Der blonde Eckbert* (Fair Eckbert; 1796) and *Volksmärchen* (Popular Legends and Fairy Tales; 1797). Tieck published the play *Der gestiefelte Kater* (Puss in Boots) in 1797.
15. *Furcht und Elend des dritten Reich,* a series of short scenes linked by poems, with music by Hanns Eisler, was performed in 1937 and partially published in Moscow in 1941, with a fuller version published 1945 in New York and a revised version published 1948 in Berlin. The first version was translated as *The Private Life of the Master Race* (1944), the revised version as *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1970).
16. The SS (*Schutzstaffel,* literally "defense echelon") was an elite quasi-military unit of the Nazi party that served as Hitler's personal guard and as a special security force in Germany and the occupied countries. The *Volksgerichtshof* (People's Court) to which Benjamin refers was established in Germany in April 1934 to deal with enemies of the state. It dispensed with trial by jury and the right of appeal.
17. Reference is to Molière's play *Dom Juan* (Don Juan; 1665).