Berthold Brecht - Epic Theatre

Devices using the 'v' effect

A theatrical device is a method or technique used onstage which has an aim or purpose. The aim when using the 'v' effect is to ensure that the audience are constantly reminded that they’re watching a piece of theatre.

Narration

Narration is used to remind the audience that what they’re watching is a presentation of a story. Sometimes the narrator will tell us what happens in the story before it has happened. This is a good way of making sure that we don’t become emotionally involved in the action to come as we already know the outcome.

Coming out of role / third person narration

Commenting upon a character as an actor is a clear way of reminding the audience of theatricality. For example, midway through a heightened scene the action might break for the actor to comment upon their character in the third person, ‘Darius felt his anger rise. He wasn’t being listened to and wanted revenge’, before returning to the scene.

Speaking the stage directions

This device was used by Brecht more frequently in rehearsal than performance. It helps distance the actor from the character they’re playing. It also reminds the audience that they’re watching a play and forces them to study the actions of a character in objective detail.

Direct address

Speaking directly to the audience breaks the fourth wall and destroys any illusion of reality. An example would be the moment where Grusha pleads to save baby Michael in The Caucasian Chalk Circle by Brecht: I brought him up, shall I also tear him to bits? I can’t.

Using placards

A placard is a sign or additional piece of written information presented onstage. Using placards might be as simple as holding up a card or banner. Multimedia or a PowerPoint slideshow can also be used for this effect. The musical, Miss Saigon, for example, used a slideshow to demonstrate the loss of lives in the Vietnam War which was highly effective. What’s important is that the information doesn’t just comment upon the action but deepens our understanding of it.

For example, a married couple are arguing and the wife is very upset. If the actress held up a placard saying ‘I’m miserable’ that wouldn’t tell us anything about the character that we didn’t already know. However, if her placard said ‘I’m having an affair’ or ‘I’ve never loved him’ the audience would be forced to consider other aspects of their relationship and to think about deeper reasons behind her tears.
Brechtian staging

Multi-roling

Multi-roling is when an actor plays more than one character onstage. The differences in character are marked by changing voice, movement, gesture and body language but the audience can clearly see that the same actor has taken on more than one role. This means the audience are more aware of the fact that they are watching a presentation of events. Cross-sex casting is also possible in Epic theatre as we don’t need to suspend our disbelief.

Split-role

This is where more than one actor plays the same character. For instance, the actor playing the main character might rotate from scene to scene. This keeps that character representational and inhibits emotional involvement and attachment on the part of the audience.

Minimal set / costume / props

Set, costume and props are all kept simple and representational. Elaborate costumes might mean that the sense of theatre, of pretending to be something else, was lost.

Brecht did believe in historicism as a convention of verfremdungseffekt. Although mise-en-scène or the stage setting was minimal, there was always a sense of authenticity to production elements apart from a little sound and lighting. For example, Mother Courage’s cart in the National Theatre production is stocked full with realistic props that Mother Courage would need for authenticity. The cart is the fifth member of the family according to Brecht so there are examples of props being as important as characters in his plays.

Symbolic props

Often one item can be used in a variety of ways. A suitcase might become a desk, or a car door or a bomb.

Lighting

Brecht believed in keeping lighting simple as he didn’t want the production values to overshadow the message of the work. He believed in using harsh white light as this illuminates the truth. However, many modern productions do use lighting effects. The important thing is that the audience still see the theatre, so often they will see production personnel, such as backstage crew, in action on the stage rather than hidden.
Other Brechtian devices

Song and dance

This is a good way to ensure that the audience sees the theatre and are reminded of the fact they are watching a play. Often in Brechtian theatre the style of the music and the lyrics jar, they don’t seem to fit together in style. This distances the audience further.

It’s worth listening to the song ‘Mack the Knife’ from The Threepenny Opera by Brecht and Kurt Weil. Notice how the musical arrangement and melody are upbeat and joyous, yet the lyrics are sinister and dark. This is a very Brechtian approach. One of the most famous lines from this work would still appeal to a modern audience: Who is the bigger criminal: he who robs a bank or he who founds one?

Kneehigh Theatre’s production, The Red Shoes, employed several Brechtian techniques, such as song and dance, a narrator figure, placards and multi-role casting.

Montage

It's no accident that montage is a term that we’d more readily associate with cinema. Brecht consciously borrowed the idea from silent movies. A montage is a series of short self-contained scenes grouped immediately after each other whose juxtaposition or contrast highlights the important issues with absolute clarity. This idea of separate scenes also allows for a focus on minute details if the situation of the play demands it. Brecht was influenced by the film director Sergei Eisenstein's greatest demonstration of the power of montage in the ‘Odessa Steps’ sequence of his 1925 film, Battleship Potemkin. In the famous sequence involving a runaway baby carriage, Eisenstein uses montage to arouse emotion and create suspense.
Spass and Gestus

Spass

Spass literally translates as ‘fun’. Brecht wanted to make his audience think. He realised that while we are laughing we are also thinking. So much so that the playwright Eugène Ionesco called him a ‘postman’ because he was always delivering messages! However, Brechtian work isn’t boring and it’s definitely not always serious either. Even if the message itself is serious Brecht realised that comedy could be an excellent way of engaging the audience and forcing them to think about issues.

Spass was also an excellent way to break the tension. Brecht needed to break rising tension to stop the audience from following characters on their emotional journey. It might be used in the form of a comic song, slapstick or physical comedy or even a stand-up routine. It’s ‘silliness’ in effect but often makes strong social comment in the way it’s used in the treatment of a serious subject.

For example, a very serious work addressing suicide might break the action at a key moment in a character’s unhappiness to break into a parody of an American advert:

Are you feeling low? Depressed? Think there’s no way out? Then you need new ‘End it All’...

The poor taste of this would be shocking for an audience. But it actually highlights the pain of depression through contrast and black comedy. The audience will laugh and then question why they laughed.

Gestus

Gestus, another Brechtian technique, is a clear character gesture or movement used by the actor that captures a moment or attitude rather than delving into emotion. So every gesture was important. Brecht and his actors studied photographs of the plays in rehearsal to ensure each moment worked effectively. Could the audience tell by the actor’s gestures alone what was happening in the scene?

Brecht didn’t want the actors to be the character onstage, only to show them as a type of person. For example, the boss who is corrupt and smoking a fat cigar as his workers starve is representative of every boss who profits through the exploitation of others. For this reason Brecht will often refer to his characters by archetypal names, such as ‘The Soldier’ or ‘The Girl’.

The interpretation will be built on the character’s social role and why they need to behave as they do, rather than looking inwardly at emotional motivation. So we judge the character and their situation, rather than just empathising with them.

Gestus is also gesture with social comment. For example, a soldier saluting as he marches across a stage is a gesture. But if he was saluting as he marched over a stage strewn with dead bodies, it would be Gestus as a social comment about the type of person he represents. Mother Courage’s silent scream in the face of her son’s dead body is strange. Therefore we think of why she must hide her feelings rather than losing ourselves in the emotion. We react as thinking human beings as Helene Weigel – Brecht’s wife and partner in work - puts it.
Epic theatre

The idea of objectivity and the absence of empathy developed into a concept of theatre that’s called Epic theatre, as opposed to what Brecht referred to as Dramatic theatre.

Dramatic theatre has a plot or story. We go to the theatre expecting the plot to be laid out before us and all issues to be resolved at the end. Epic theatre doesn’t attempt this neatness. The narrative starts and ends, leaving issues unresolved, confronting the audience with questions about what they’ll do. Ideally Epic theatre will be an inspiration to action whereas Brecht thought Dramatic theatre was entertainment. Dramatic theatre in his view should engage the audience in an emotional experience only for their time in the theatre.

Scenes are episodic, which means they stand alone and are constructed in small chunks, rather than creating a lengthy and slow build of tension. Dramatic theatre has a linear narrative which means its events happen in chronological order. Epic theatre often has a fractured narrative that is non-linear and jumps about in time.

Epic theatre also shows an argument. It’s a clear political statement. The audience remains objective and watches a montage or a series of scenes. Standing outside the action emotionally, the audience can study the story objectively and should recognise social realities.

Brecht today

Brecht’s plays are still highly popular today. If you need to review a Brechtian performance, it won’t be so very different from any other review, except that you will be interested in how effectively the performers have measured up to the expectations of the script. As a political writer, Brecht would surely have expected a modern production to address current issues whilst remaining true to his ideals. If preparing a review, you should try and get hold of a programme so that you can study the director’s notes. This will help you understand what issues they were seeking to portray in the production and how they went about it.
Brecht Explained

Verfrumdungseffekt/Alienation Technique

Verfrumdungseffekt can be most accurately translated as the 'making strange effect', and it seeks to do precisely that; to make the familiar strange, to give every day events the status of something grand or epic. The 'Alienation Effect' was developed by Brecht in the 1920's and 30's. It is a technique which 'estranges' the audience and forces them to question the social realities of the situations being presented in the play. Brecht achieved this by breaking the illusion created by conventional plays of the time. He believed that the 'suspension of disbelief' created by realistic drama was a shallow spectacle, with manipulative plots and heightened emotion. This theatre is a form of 'escapism' and did not challenge the audience at all. Rather than feel a deep connection to the characters Brecht believed that an emotional distance should be maintained. It is only when this happens, that the audience can effectively critique and evaluate the struggle between the characters and understand the social realities of the narrative. This is evident in Mother Courage and Her Children when we see Mother Courage singing a lullaby to her daughter Kattrin and then later paying for her funeral without any emotion. The ambivalence and irony of the characters, particularly Mother Courage is what is so alienating about the play. We find ourselves constantly questioning the role of Mother Courage. What kind of mother is she? Why is she called Courage? How is she courageous? The audience questions the presentation they see before them, which is exactly what Brecht wanted his audience to do.

Didacticism

Didacticism is the instruction or teaching of a moral lesson. Brecht's plays are didactic in that they all serve to teach the audience or send a message about certain aspects of society, politics or economy. They are plays which are designed to educate the performers and audience. It stems from Brecht's Marxist beliefs and the plays generally show the bourgeois society negatively and the rightness of Marxist morality. In Mother Courage and Her Children, specifically, the didacticism lies in the contradictions of the characters and how their choices have affected their lives and the value of it. The idea that Mother Courage is driven by making money and not taking care of her children is shocking to the audience. Whenever her children need her she is making a business deal. Her actions make the audience question: how much is life really worth? How much am I like Mother Courage? What would I change or do differently? The play teaches a lesson about society, economy and politics and wrestles with these throughout the play.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

'The Fourth Wall' is an imaginary wall separating the audience from the action on the stage. In realistic productions this wall remains intact and the performers do not acknowledge that they are being watched. The audience are observers who are conditioned to believe that the world of the play is 'real'. It is a suspension of disbelief. Like most theories of realism, Brecht wanted to disrupt the notion of the fourth wall. 'Breaking the fourth wall' involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience, whether they break character or perform with an awareness of being watched. It is made clear that the characters and their actions are not real and the audience are aware that they are witnessing fiction. The theory behind this technique links back to his definition of Epic Theatre. By taking away the fourth wall the audience must face the action, make decisions and have the opportunity to be aroused to action (see Epic Theatre table).
**Acting Techniques**

Brecht believed that an actor should present a character in a way that wasn't an impersonation, rather, a narration of the actions of the character. He did this because he wanted to constantly remind his audience that they were watching a play. He also believed that if the audience developed an emotional attachment to the characters, then they could not evaluate the social realities of the play. Stanislavski thought that if an actor believed he was a character, then the audience would believe this as well, and feel the emotions that the character was feeling. Brecht did not want this to happen; he wanted the audience to question, make comment and interpret what was on the stage. The Brechtian theatre does not show the human nature of an individual but reveals collective human relations. The story is the point of interest, not the characters. The story is the sequence of events that is the social experiment, allowing the interplay of social forces, from which the play's lesson emerges. If the audience does not maintain a distance between the characters and themselves then this cannot be achieved. Acting in Epic Theatre means that an actor is required to play characters believably without convincing either the audience or themselves that they are, indeed, the characters. There is an audible and visual distance between the actor and their character and the actors will often 'break the fourth wall' and address the audience, play multiple characters, and use exaggerated or repetitive actions to make their distance and social commentary known.

**Gestus**

Gestus is a theatrical technique that helps define the emotion within a character and the context they are in. It is the combination of a gesture and a social meaning into one movement, stance or vocal display. It can be alienating and jar the audience, as it is an unusual and non realistic way of forcing them to see the 'bigger picture' of a situation. It is sometimes referred to as the 'social gest', as it is an action that allows the audience to understand something specific about the social circumstances presented on stage. For example, if a man was eating a sandwich and a dog suddenly attacked him and tried to take his food while the man tried to push the dog away, this would not be gestus. The act of pushing the dog away becomes gestus when social meaning is added to the picture. For example, the man is a servant in a castle and the dog belongs to the guards at the gate and they have let the dog out knowing that he will attack the man, and they are standing off to the side laughing at him. Now the action of pushing the dog away has become gestus as it is an action that holds social meaning. The audience knows that this is not just any man, this is a working class man who is being picked on by people with a little more power over him.

The most famous example of gestus is in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Mother Courage shows her inner emotional turmoil not through words, but through a physical presentation. She looks at the audience and delivers a silent scream. Again, it is not the action alone that makes it gestus, but rather the combination of this action and the social meaning. Mother Courage has just lost a son, but if she makes any sound of recognition towards him she will put her life and the life of her daughter in danger. Now she represents any person who has had to keep quiet in order to save somebody else. She has been forced into a terrible situation and the audience gets to see this through her gestus of a silent scream.
Narration and Song

Not only was Brecht a writer, director and producer, but he was also a great poet. He wrote many songs for his productions, mostly in collaboration with Kurt Weill. The purpose of song in his plays is not to heighten the emotion of the scenes but as a means to commentate or narrate what is going on. It is also a form of alienating the audience, for example, in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the songs’ content may be serious and forewarning of hardships, while the music is happy and light. It shows a lighter side to a deeply serious situation and the dichotomy and ambiguity of it ultimately alienates the audience and makes them question the social realities that are being presented. The music and the action should serve to make each other seem strange. The music composed for USQ’s production by Lauren O’Rourke has a very broad style. It is eclectic and each song is composed in a way that questions what the moment and characters are seeking to achieve. Lauren is also acting in the production, and because she has such a close relationship to the process and the story, it has made the music so much more fitting to the production.
Clarity - Putting over a Message - Gest

Brecht's principal concern is to put over a message in such a way that an audience can be in no doubt as to the intentions of the performance. That is the reason he and his actors spent so much time poring over photographs of the plays in rehearsal - each moment of the play was photographed - checking that the still moment captured on film delivered clearly what was supposed to be happening on stage. Was it clear that so-and-so was about to tell a lie? Would the audience be able to tell that the judge was in the pay of the gangsters and that the defendant had been beaten? Just by looking at the stage picture? The language of gesture and facial expression is clearly very important then to the Brechtian technique.

Practical Work

1. The class should pair up and then face their partners with the furthest distance possible between them, e.g. the extreme ends of the hall or studio. Thus you have the whole group divided into half with one half facing the other.

Without telling their partners, each individual thinks of a well-known nursery rhyme or the words of a song with which they are familiar. Then, on a signal from the teacher, everyone speaking at once tries to communicate their rhyme to their partner; so everyone is talking and listening at the same time. The result will be pandemonium! Stop it very quickly, after only a few seconds. Ask them how many understood what their partner was saying. Very few will, unless you have a tiny group. Then, talking strictly, tell them it is life and death that they communicate their 'message' to their partners, but give them no clues as to how to do this. They must stay where they are and they are still both communicating and listening.

What should happen, and usually does, is that more and more individuals start to use gesture and pantomime their rhymes. Let it run for a little longer, but not long enough for people to reach the end of their rhymes, because that will leave some voices exposed. Now ask how many understood their partners. Far more will, if not the whole group.

Emphasise the importance of gesture and body language to communicate a message.

2. Still in pairs, ask the students to find three different body positions and facial expressions to communicate the following: love; respect; disbelief; regret; admiration; intimidation. In each case one partner will have to be the one 'doing' and the other one will be 'receiving' or reacting. Test these out by using the rest of the class as an audience, perhaps not having known the stimulus.

Now develop this by making a sequence of the three 'stills', linked together with brief narration, which one of the pair, A or B, supplies.

e.g. taking 'love', first 'still' shows A's admiring gaze on B, who is dancing. Narration = 'Andy first saw Beth at the party. He had never seen anyone so attractive before. He determined to talk to her.' Second 'still', A asking B for a date...etc.

Brecht believes that social situations change the way people behave, unlike Stanislavski, who showed through his System that people are the same the world over, sharing the same emotions in whatever period of history they may be born. Thus Oedipus, Othello, and Dr Stockmann, though they come from entirely different periods of time and social and cultural backgrounds, are basically the same. Their pain is the eternal pain of human suffering.

Brecht was anxious to disprove this. He believed that human beings are formed by their society and culture and their behaviour is appropriate to their time; in consequence, he wanted to create theatre that was
appropriate to 'the modern age' and characters that react in a twentieth century way: "theatre for the scientific age," and since the scientific age is a rational one, character, like everything else should be put under the microscope.

3. With the students in small groups, each group is given a situation. They are to discuss the different responses to their situation and then compile three short scenes which demonstrate three different responses, or, if they are able, all three responses could take place in the same scene from three different characters.

Suitable situations:

- the battlefield when the side you are on is losing
  e.g. of different responses to demonstrate: fighting heroically till death; running away from the battlefield; keeping head down in a bomb crater and responding as necessary to anyone else, friend or foe, entering that crater with you.
- the factory when the management has awarded themselves a payrise but not the workers
- a group of patients whose doctor has been arrested for possible murder
- members of a small community whose village is threatened by the building of a huge out-of-town shopping centre nearby

Discuss afterwards the difference it makes when characters are responding directly to situations. Would it make a difference if the characters had been built up from the inside, Stanislavski fashion? Does a meek man always respond meekly? Or might he discover a lion inside him if his family was threatened? At what point does the pacifist become ready to kill?

There is much food for debate here with your groups and I believe it is fruitful, because there will be many who are reluctant to let go of their Stanislavskian background [or at least the kind of 'realism' offered by some of their favourite soaps]. Many students will prefer not to challenge the concept that characters behave consistently and that they can be given a 'through-line' from birth to death.

But are real life people consistent? Of course they are not. People contradict themselves the whole time, with perfect sincerity. People in literature, however, often are consistent - they are made so by their authors - and that is why Stanislavski's System can work for so many plays of a certain naturalistic type, because the truth about life he is aiming to show on stage is "artistic truth", i.e. life in a tidied up form.

I am certainly not suggesting that you should undermine such work as you have done on Stanislavski, but it should be stressed that naturalism works for plays of a certain type and there are many other genres of play around. All this above work is necessary to establish the different standpoints of Stanislavski and Brecht and to open the students' minds to other forms of theatre than naturalism. Brecht's sprawling choice of theatrical expression, his 'epic theatre', is ideally formed to show characters over a wide span of years in a number of situations, responding directly to these situations, as their reason or the needs of the moment dictate. His form of theatre is therefore in many ways more 'realistic' than Stanislavski's tidy naturalism.

Working in this way, with situation rather than character as the basis for action, Brecht needed a different theatre language than that established by naturalism. So far we have explored the need for clarity and the establishment of situation, without taking this further into establishing a message for the audience. This is of course what gives Brechtian theatre its particular slant. A Brechtian play must have an 'attitude' and that attitude will be political in the broadest sense of the word. This 'attitude' demands a group of actors who are consciously projecting the message by means of their characters and their staging. Throughout the entire performance, the actors must not lose sight of their true objective, whether it is to provoke debate or to educate the audience and so they must never become immersed in their characters or this will muddle the intention. Further, they must know at every moment of the play what attitude that scene or moment of the
play is putting over. Hence we have the Brechtian word 'gest' or 'gestus'; the two mean the same and are interchangeable.

'Gest' is gesture plus attitude. Brecht defines it in this way: a group of soldiers marching across the stage is merely 'gesture'; the soldiers are not conveying anything to the audience other than that they are soldiers. Put a number of dead bodies on the stage and have the soldiers marching over them and you have 'gest'. The picture shown to the audience is that the soldiers are uncaring, deadened to war and the results of it, so that is conveying an 'attitude.' "Gest' is the main area that students seem to find difficult to grasp. It is, of course, much easier to do that to describe. The following exercise is particularly helpful in identifying the difference between gesture and gest.

4. The students all move around the room (I tend to use my familiar grid exercise for this, because it sharpens their attention and has them moving in a more purposeful manner). The floor is divided up with imaginary lines like graph paper. Individuals may only move along the lines, in silence, at a crisp pace, making only sharp turns, not stopping, not slowing down, taking evasive action if someone is coming towards them on a collision course; bumping is not allowed.

Having established the rhythmic way of moving, they will be concentrated and quickly warmed up. Then tell them that when you clap your hands they partner up with the person nearest to them. Without talking, they should make instant statues of the following. Between each statue they should move back to the grid so that the next statue is done with someone else as partner.

- Romeo and Juliet
- summer and winter
- cat and mouse
- hero and coward
- song and dance
- rich and poor
- war and peace

On the last one, 'rich and poor', get them to look around at each other. I would almost guarantee they will have come up with nearly identical poses: the rich person looking snootily in the air and avoiding contact with the poor person, who is down in a begging position, looking pitiful.

Find out if they can see the difference between a statue for, say, summer and winter, and this one. It is the difference between gesture and gest. Unconsciously, each one of them is showing an opinion, an attitude: the rich are snobby and uncaring, the poor are needy and to be sympathised with. Their poses have been 'gests'. Of course, then it needs explaining that what a Brechtian actor is doing is making gests consciously. A true gest cannot really be unplanned, unconscious. But though they have been 'tricked' into doing a gest, you will find they remember it and it makes a good example.

5. Divide the class into groups. Explain that gest covers individual body language and facial expression (also voice tone when necessary) but it is also a term to describe the whole stage picture. Gest is about attitude, but it is also about clarity. The attitude of the actors and the play must be put over as clearly as possible, whether there is one actor alone on the stage or a huge number. Gest is being used all the time.

Ask the groups to make two contrasting gestic tableaux of the following:
• a] A picture entitled 'War, the maker of heroes' and a picture entitled 'The waste of war'
• b] A picture showing one member of the group as the most popular person in the school and a picture showing that same person as the least liked member of the school
• c] A picture entitled 'the trustworthy politician, friend to the people' and a picture entitled 'the insincere face of politics', or 'do not trust this person'

If gest is the whole stage picture, discuss what other things could be added to, say, the first two on war, to help communicate the gest? Costume additions, props, is what you want as the answer, for instance shiny uniforms and medals for the first picture; rags and tatters, bloody bandages, etc. for the second one.

6. Return to the earlier exercise on situation rather than character. Here the students presented three possible responses to a given situation. Now ask them to choose an attitude that they as a group wish the audience to understand. Perhaps that attitude may be, using the first scenario as an example, that it is better to keep your head low in that bomb crater, keeping your options open. What adjustments would be needed to the characters and their different responses to make your attitude to them clear? Perhaps the hero becomes stupid, exaggeratedly gung-ho and not bright enough to see that death is not necessarily glorious. The man keeping his head down may become rational, thinking things through and sharing his thoughts with the audience in a humorous fashion, because he wants - as do the rest of the cast - the audience to be on his side and to see his solutions as the best option in a difficult situation. Get the students to repeat their final presentation, making clear the attitude they have to the three responses.

It is necessary to start with gest, because, as you will quickly find, it is something that the actor is using all the time. A Brechtian actor cannot perform without deciding on the attitude he is taking to the piece and the character. In any performance this will be a group decision; each actor will be absolutely clear as to the viewpoint the whole scene is conveying and the way he must interpret his character in consequence, in order to contribute correctly to the whole piece.