



HIPPODROME
EDUCATION
NETWORK



BIRMINGHAM
HIPPODROME
PROJECTS

Learning and Participation Resource Pack

Practitioner Study - Bertolt Brecht

Suitable for KS4/KS5



HIPPODROME
EDUCATION
NETWORK



BIRMINGHAM
HIPPODROME
PROJECTS

Overview

In this pack we will look at who Bertolt Brecht was, his opinion on what theatre should be, and some of his techniques that you could use in your work!

Lesson Ideas

Starting Activity: Read the biography below and then look at the questions.

Who was Bertolt Brecht? A biography.



Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht was a poet, playwright and theatrical reformer. He was born on 10th February 1898 in Augsburg, Bavaria (a German state until 1918). His father was a Catholic who worked in a paper mill, and his mother was a devout protestant. He lived in Bavaria until 1924, attending Grammar School, then medical school at Munich University and being conscripted as a medical orderly. During his young adulthood he also began attending theatrical seminars, involving himself in 'bohemian literary life'. He was

known in his youth for being anti-patriotic. In his early theatrical career, he wrote theatre reviews for a local newspaper, *Ausberger Neueste Nachrichten*, and wrote some of his early works.

Brecht visited Berlin as early as 1920, but did not settle there until 1924, having left University. During this time, he married, had a daughter, and wrote many more plays. Hitler's National Socialist party (the Nazis) began to be discussed within Brecht's circles, and Brecht began to use certain theatrical devices in his work for which he is now famous (more information below).

Between 1924 and 1933, Brecht's work became even more political, prompting criticism from the Nazi Party as his work often took a leftist or communist stance. In 1928, Brecht rose to prominence with his version of *The Beggar's Opera*, *The Threepenny Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill. Brecht was influenced by people such as Erwin Piscator (a pioneer of communist political theatre) and Karl Marx, whom he studied. During this time, he divorced Marianne Zoff and married his second wife Helene Weigel, with whom he had another daughter, and later a son who was American.

In 1933, when the Nazis came to power, Brecht fled with his family to Prague. In 1935, he was stripped of his German citizenship. Between 1933 and the late 1940s, Brecht lived in a number of different places including the USA, where he did some work in Hollywood. It was during this time that he wrote most of his great plays, despite being cut off from the German theatre. The most famous of his works include: *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

In 1947, Brecht was forced to appear before the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (where he was suspected for his communist sympathies). After this, he and his wife left the USA and went to Zurich, Switzerland. By 1949, Brecht had resettled in Berlin, where he and his wife created The Berliner Ensemble, a state-subsidised theatre company which by 1956, was recognised as the most progressive theatre company in Europe. That year, Brecht died of a heart attack on 14 August. During his final years, Brecht was very politically active, objecting to rearmament in Germany (the Paris Treaty) and writing published letters regarding strikes and demonstrations in the country.

Task ideas/starting points - perhaps do some research and think about the questions below.

- What else can you find out about Bavaria where Brecht was born?

- We know from the information above that the First and Second World Wars affected Brecht's life, but what else do you know about the wars and political situations surrounding them that might have influenced Brecht's work?
- Is there anything or anyone mentioned in the text above that you aren't familiar with? Do some research to find out more.
- What is communism?

Task developments

Read the following about Brecht's techniques and then look at the questions below.

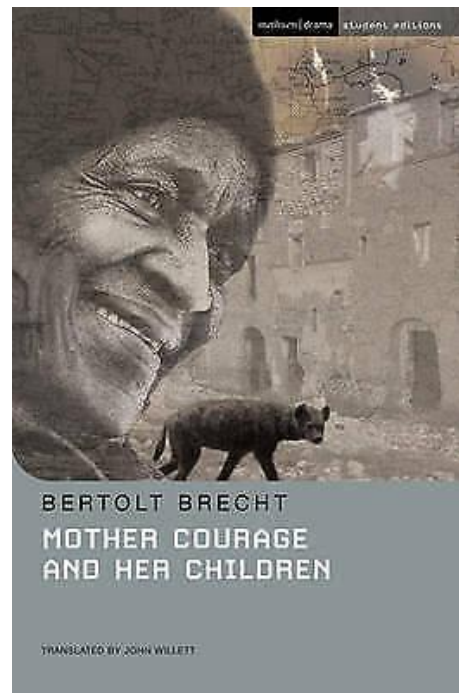
Brecht's techniques:

Brecht wanted his work, known as 'Epic Theatre' or 'dialectal theatre' to be political, address contemporary issues, and for it to encourage his audience to think about and question the world in which they lived. He did not want the audience to be emotionally invested in the story, as this would stop them being objective. Critics of Brecht argue that in order to affect an audience, you have to touch them emotionally, but he was against any form of 'escapist' (dramatic) theatre that did so; he believed that the theatre should be used to educate, inform and provoke thought.

Verfremdungseffekt was how Brecht broke his audience's connection to his plays. It includes:

- Breaking the fourth wall; directly addressing the audience, which breaks the illusion that the play is 'real life'. Brecht sometimes had actors ask the audience questions.
- Use of song, music or dance, which again reminded the audience that the play was not real life. In contrast to Musical Theatre, which often has songs depicting the characters inner-life and emotional reality, Brecht's use of song and dance was often ironic and juxtaposed the story or mood of the play.

- Narration; a reminder to the audience that they are watching a story.
- Minimal set, costumes and lighting; suggestive of the time/ place, but not realistic.
- Actors coming out of character, often at pivotal points in the story, again to remind the audience that it is not real.
- Placards/projections; these added factual information and sometimes introduced characters. Brecht also used this technique for the transition between scenes.
- Freeze frames/tableaux. These breaks in the action allowed the audience to think/consider what was happening in the play.
- Historicisation; Brecht often set his plays in the past, but used the themes of past events to comment on the present, therefore encouraging the audience's separation from the story and allowing them to view the themes objectively. This also showed the differences between past and present. A great example of this is *Mother Courage and her Children*, which is set during the 30 Years War of the 1600s, but was written at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. The themes of the play include war as business and virtue in wartime, and tells the story of a woman who tries to profit from a war which eventually claims the lives of her three children, highlighting war's devastating effects.



Answer the questions below. You might do this in notes or write short paragraphs.

- Can you think of any examples of theatre where you have seen these techniques used? Did they have the desired effect and why?

- Do you have any ideas of how you could use these techniques in your devised work? What techniques most appeal to you and why?

- Do you agree that audiences can and should be emotionally detached from theatrical works?

Further Task Ideas

- Pick a modern-day issue that YOU would like people to think about (perhaps you could cut an article out of a newspaper for inspiration, or pick a recent event you know about. An example could be; anti-bullying or climate change). Write a scene about this issue. Try to incorporate as many of Brecht's techniques as you can that you think will help your audience to really engage with the issue (not the story!)
- Find and read/watch one of Bertolt Brecht's plays online and write down your thoughts. You could even use sticky notes to mark points where he uses the techniques you've learnt about!
- See if you can think of/find out about any subsequent theatre makers who have been influenced by Bertolt Brecht!



Outcome

Now you should have some knowledge about the life of Bertolt Brecht, his thoughts about the theatre and be aware of some of his techniques. You should have thought about your own opinions on these techniques and how you can implement some of them into your work in drama.

Resources and useful links

The information in this pack has been created from prior knowledge, experience and study with the help of the resources listed below. You may wish to refer to these for your own research.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertolt-Brecht>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht#Life_and_career

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Courage_and_Her_Children#Synopsis

<https://www.sparknotes.com/drama/mothercourage/>

<https://www.dramaclases.biz/bertolt-brecht-techniques-and-factsbertolt-brecht-techniques-and-facts>

Mother Courage and Her Children by Bertolt Brecht - Methuen Drama Student Edition.

Great Moments in the Theatre by Benedict Nightingale.

The Theatre: A Concise History (fourth edition) Phylliss Hartnoll, Updated by Enoch Brater.

Please Note: Birmingham Hippodrome takes no responsibility for the content of third party websites



If you require further information contact
schools@birminghamhippodrome.com
participation@birminghamhippodrome.com



BIRMINGHAM
HIPPODROME
PROJECTS