

## GERMAN AND BRITISH INTERFERENCES: THE IMPACT OF BRECHT'S EPIC THEATRE ON ARDEN AND BOND

### INTERFÉRENCES ALLEMANDES ET BRITANNIQUES: L'IMPACT DU THÉÂTRE ÉPIQUE DE BRECHT SUR ARDEN ET BOND

### INTERFERENȚE GERMANO-BRITANICE: INFLUENȚA LUI BRECHT ȘI A TEATRULUI EPIC ASUPRA LUI ARDEN ȘI BOND

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#### **Abstract**

*By challenging people's deep-rooted beliefs and ideologies, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht considered that the supreme goal of epic theatre was to reform people's conscience and pave the way for a positive change in the individual and society as a whole. Influenced by his new theatrical vision, John Arden and Edward Bond adapted the epic model to their personal style in scathing satires of the British society. The purpose of the article is to highlight the contribution of Bertolt Brecht and his followers to the development of social and political theatre.*

#### **Résumé**

*En remettant en question les croyances et les idéologies profondes des gens, le dramaturge allemand Bertolt Brecht considérait que le but suprême du théâtre épique était de réformer la conscience des gens et d'ouvrir la voie à un changement positif de l'individu et de la société dans son ensemble. Influencé par sa nouvelle vision théâtrale, John Arden et Edward Bond ont adapté le modèle épique à leur style personnel en créant des satires acerbes de la société britannique. Le but de l'article est de mettre en évidence la contribution de Bertolt Brecht et de ses adeptes au développement du théâtre social et politique.*

#### **Rezumat**

*Provocând ideologii și credințe adânc înrădăcinate, dramaturgul german Bertolt Brecht a considerat că scopul suprem al teatrului epic este de a reforma conștiințele și de a deschide calea pentru o schimbare pozitivă a individului și societății în ansamblul ei. Influențați de noua sa viziune teatrală, John Arden și Edward Bond au adaptat modelul epic stilului lor dramatic personal în satire usturătoare ale societății britanice. Articolul își propune să evidențieze contribuția lui Bertolt Brecht și a adepților săi la dezvoltarea teatrului social și politic.*

**Keywords:** Brecht, epic theatre, influence, British drama, theatrical revolution.

**Mots-clés:** Brecht, théâtre épique, influence, drame britannique, révolution théâtrale.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Brecht, teatrul epic, influență, drama britanică, revoluție teatrală.

## **Introduction**

In a 1927 article entitled *The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties*, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht advocated a new theatrical style which he tagged as epic theatre to differentiate it from the “dramatic” essence of the traditional theatre inherited from Aristotle. According to him, epic theatre was required by modern society because it corresponded “to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time” (BRECHT, 1973, 23). Shifting the stress from emotion to a detached and critical attitude on the part of the audience, this theatre was meant to appeal “less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things” (BRECHT, 1973, 23).

The dramatist expressed his views in an original theatrical theory that was exemplified in his entire creation. Throughout the twentieth century, his influence reverberated in the works of a large number of playwrights and performance creators contributing to the development of social and political theatre to a great extent. Many representatives of the British stage were sensitive to the thematic and formal innovations of German epic drama that they attempted to adopt in a variety of forms. Among the most important followers of Brecht’s style are John Arden and Edward Bond who, starting from the principles of epic theatre, created a highly original drama.

## **Brecht’s epic theatre: an artistic revolution**

Basing his theory on the theatrical experiments of Meyerhold and Piscator, Brecht developed the concept of “non-Aristotelian” drama or epic theatre in his subsequent essays, especially in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949), where he set forth the basic tenets of a modernist drama. Contrary to Stanislavsky’s naturalistic reproduction of reality, the epic form was meant to discuss social, political and moral issues in the light of the dialectical and materialist principles of Marxist aesthetics, aiming at “the critique and transformation of the existing bourgeois order” (KELLNER, 2010, 30). As Robert Cohen puts it, “Brecht deliberately created a dramatic style as radically presentational as naturalism was representational” (COHEN, 2000, 23). In essence, the German playwright adopted an anti-illusionistic theatrical approach grounded in the estrangement or the “making strange” effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), that is, in making the spectator experience “a sense of astonishment” and unfamiliarity when watching the performance by “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality” (KRAMER, 2002, 219). In other words, instead of stimulating the audience’s emotional identification with the characters of the play, this effect induces a psychological distance in the viewers enabling them to think about the events featured on stage. By increasing the audience’s awareness of the dramatic conventions, Brecht believed that spectators would be sufficiently moved to take action and improve the existing social order.

In order to undermine the theatre of illusion and exemplify his epic theatre style, the dramatist devised and experimented “a narrative form” that tells a story through a variety of theatrical devices. As J.L. Styan states, “illustrative scenes, choruses and commentators, songs and dances, projected titles and summaries” formed a “closed, ‘parable’ play which focused on moral dilemma” (1983, 140). Basically, Brecht’s parables or “teaching” plays, as he defined them, constitute examples of “total theatre” whose component elements (words, music and scene), against Wagner’s integrative treatment of arts, were approached according to “the principle of separation” with a view to destroying the synthesis and unity of the fictional world expected by the traditional audience. Conceiving his theatre entirely in accordance with this tenet, he used montage techniques such as fragmentation, juxtaposition and contrast to present the dramatic material in an avantgardistic manner. Thus, in lieu of a sustained plot development following Aristotle’s principles, epic drama lies in an episodic structure involving a sequence of unrelated and autonomous scenes where, for demonstration and didactic purposes, the story line is often interrupted by comments, announcements, visuals and songs. As there are no causal relationships between events, the play advances and acquires sense and meaning dialectically through a constant confrontation of ideas.

As regards Brecht's characters, unlike the traditional ones, they are ambivalent natures displaying contrastive features and inconsistencies (for instance, Galilei, Anna Fierling or Puntila are both concrete individuals standing for a professional category or particular class and general human types or abstractions impersonating the dramatist's views). Through his protagonists, whose acts are motivated solely by social conditions and not by psychological criteria, he intended to expose how a specific historical environment "influenced, shaped, and often battered and destroyed the characters" (KELLNER, 2010, 31). In this way, Brecht wanted his spectators to achieve the unity of opposites in their mind and find the overall significance of the performance by harmonizing what seemed fragmentary and contradictory on stage.

Brecht's rejection of the entertainment function of the theatre justifies his interest in the use of nonmimetic stagecraft which, exploring the suggestive possibilities of scenic devices such as bright lighting, masks and puppetry or the exposure of the theatrical apparatus, may keep spectators alert reminding them that they are watching a performance. The bare stage as well as the minimalism of the props – usually reduced to significant objects like the wagon of Anna Fierling in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and the gallows in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – cannot but generate the distancing effect necessary to break with the spectators' emotional involvement and allow them to ponder over the moral lesson of the play. By removing the "fourth wall", the dramatist introduced an anti-illusionistic style of acting based on the actor's impersonalized interpretation of a role and the illustration of his concept of "gestus". It is essentially a presentational approach to acting according to which the actor has a double function, namely to perform and narrate a role at the same time. As a performer of epic drama, the artist is required to play in a cold and distant manner that excludes any identification with the impersonated character. As a narrator, the artist has to step out of his character and address the viewers directly in order to show, explain and demonstrate to them the character's actions and behaviour.

Brecht's conception of theatre led to a new kind of actor-audience relationship that abolished the traditional separation between the world of the stage and its spectators in order to encourage them to participate intellectually in the theatrical event. In this way, he managed to shift the focus from the theatre experience viewed as "an act of seeing and being seen" (BARRANGER, 1995, 16) to an act of showing and critical thinking. For him, theatrical pleasure implied the satisfaction of discovering the truths highlighted on stage.

### **Reinterpreting epic theatre: John Arden**

Distinguishing himself from the "wide range of superficially Brechtian drama that appeared on the English stage", John Arden extended "Epic theatre adopting and updating it to fit the contemporary social conditions" (INNES, 2002, 115).

Convinced that modern theatre required a fundamental change at various aesthetical levels, Arden created ingenious dramatic forms characterized by stylistic diversity and a bold treatment of the subject-matter. Constituting an experimental basis for a synthesis of new theatrical devices and old stage rhetoric, the complexity of his plays lies in epic strategies and techniques employed to bring ideas to the fore, ballad forms applied to the dramatic structure and character portrayal, the mixture of different linguistic registers, the use of a strange syntax in the "Babylonish dialect" and the alternations of ordinary speech, verse and songs (*Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, *The Waters of Babylon*).

Like Brecht, Arden wanted his theatre to focus on moral, social and political issues. From this point of view, one of the most illustrative plays is *Sergeant Musgrave Dance*, an anti-war parable that breaks with traditional realistic drama. Rejecting the "kitchen sink" school promoted by the "angry young men", his play challenges the viewers' horizon of expectations. Thus, the surprising story of four deserted soldiers, who bring home the skeleton of their fellow killed in an imperial colony, proves to be a lesson of pacifism and a critique of imperialist capitalism. Invited to take part in an open debate, the audience has to reflect not only on an act of colonial violence but also on problems such as imperialist dominance, economic exploitation and social inequalities that

regard both sides, the people belonging to the colonial power and to the colony itself. In this sense, it should be noted that, set in a striking mining town in Yorkshire, the play intertwines the soldiers' condemnation of the war with the colliers' fight for employment and better living conditions.

Descending from the Brechtian antiheroes, Sergeant Musgrave is a dual character that displays two contradictory attitudes. On the one hand, he is an idealist who, at any costs, fights for absolute justice. On the other hand, although he abhors the atrocities of the colonial war and the system that allows them, he forces people into accepting his ideas of justice and pacifism. The contrast between his strong belief in order and peace and the means he chose to achieve it reaches grotesque proportions. Following his unquestionable ideal, Musgrave leads an anti-war commando to put a dreadful scenario into practice. In other words, his ardent wish is to expose the skeleton of his dead fellow in the market place on the occasion of a public meeting to make people understand that violence and militarism are evil deeds of humanity.

As a matter of fact, by dramatizing Musgrave's fanatic act, Arden proposed his own version of epic drama to draw the audience's attention to the fact that people cannot be taught the lesson of pacifism by means of violence and war weapons. Although basically a theatre of ideas dwelling on antimilitarism in line with Brecht, the English playwright used, alongside epic strategies, a variety of theatrical sources within a new realistic drama whose distinguishing characteristic consists in the eclecticism of its style. The symbolic murder scenes borrowed from the Victorian plays, as well as the "strong images, the explicit dialogue, schematic characters and moral purpose" derived from the mediaeval theatre (BROWN, 1983, 18), aimed to involve the audience in debating the issues suggested by the dramatist. A memorable image is the one representing the gallows which dominate the stage as a warning sign, seeming to remind everybody of the unreliability of human justice and the futility of sacrifices to its name.

Arden, however, went beyond Brecht's critical objectivity. Owing to his particular interest in the theatricality of horror, he turned to a new account the theatre of cruelty initiated by Antonin Artaud, the prophet of modern drama. In this respect, an unforgettable scene is that showing Musgrave's grotesque dance around Billy Hicks's skeleton while chanting rhymes in the accompaniment of Hurst's drum. It has the value of a suggestive metaphor which, by combining different theatrical signs, translates primary instincts into a concrete scenic image with the purpose of shocking the audience. This "poetic dance of death" is intended to confront the viewers not only with the violence displayed on stage, but also with the potential cruelty lurking in anyone. Musgrave's threatening Gatling gun pointed at those who oppose him, townspeople or theatre audience, seems to suggest the idea that, as long as injustice and evil are passively accepted, everyone is guilty of complicity in violence and war.

Nevertheless, Musgrave hesitates in pursuing his goal at the end, especially when he tries to prevent Hurst from shooting into the crowd. The final change of his attitude may result from realizing that violence and vengeance are useless and destructive, and that their common enemies are the rulers who make people commit atrocities. Wishing to reveal an essential truth about war and imperialism by means of his hero, Arden created a thought-provoking play that invites the spectator to draw his own conclusions.

### **Staging violence: Edward Bond**

As J. L. Styan states, "the most successful Brechtian playwright in English" is Edward Bond (1983, 188). In consonance with Brecht's views, Bond believes that theatre is a school of criticism that can lead to social and moral improvement. According to him, violence is the main factor that corrodes the foundation of society and the dramatist has the moral obligation to show it on stage in order to help people transform themselves and consequently the world around them. Such a belief in the mission of the theatre is clearly expressed in the Preface to *Lear*, where he states that "violence shapes and obsesses our society and if we do not stop being violent we have no future" (BOND, 1998, 3).

Like Brecht, Bond is concerned with exposing the social context which, in his opinion, determines the behaviour of the individual. He believes that violence is not innate, but acquired in an unjust and inhumane society that condemns the human being to alienation and dehumanization. According to him, violence comes from the fact that “we are constantly deprived of our physical and emotional needs, or we are threatened with this” (BOND, 1998, 3). Present society constrains us to live in a permanent “state of aggression” which makes us “nervous and tense” looking for threats everywhere. In such a world we become “belligerent and provocative,” and our “situation rapidly deteriorates” (BOND, 1998, 4). In other words, Bond emphasizes the idea that man’s psychology is socially and politically determined, and the task of the dramatist is to reveal on stage “how human beings are deformed in the innermost spaces of their personal lives” (REINELT, 1996, 59) under the pressure of the social system.

Bond exemplifies his thesis on violence in the majority of his plays either in the form of an individual act or as a general manifestation of society. One of the plays dedicated to this issue is *The Pope’s Wedding* whose paradoxical title suggests an impossible event rather than the events presented on stage. Set in rural Essex, it first dramatizes the prerequisites of aggression by depicting the meaningless life of a group of young farm labourers whose sole escape from hard work is drinking, smoking, or playing cricket. Then the focus shifts from the group to the relationship among three protagonists, Scopey, his wife Pat, and Allan, a hermit-like old man who is looked after by both of them. As Pat’s marriage begins to disintegrate, she returns to her former fiancé while Scopey becomes more and more preoccupied with Allan, finally his obsession leading to murder. Although this act of violence is never shown or mentioned, its spectrum dominates the play until its very end when the audience’s suppositions are confirmed. In an unchanged setting reduced to a few elements that suggest moral emptiness, Scopey tells Pat that he killed the old man, but without explaining why he committed such a barbarous act. As with Brecht, it is the audience that has to judge the stage events and ponder over gratuitous violence, which has no cause and no moral consequences.

At first sight, the play may seem faithful to traditional realism due to the slow unfolding of the stage events, the use of the characters’ dialectical speech or the presence of the significant objects that have the function to recreate a recognizable reality in Wesker’s line. Nevertheless, Bond does not promote the naturalism of the kitchen-sink dramatists. What he creates instead is a theatre of atmosphere which resorts to mystery and suggestion in order to engage the audience’s interest. That is why, along with the general perception according to which his plays are “often judged, with pointed reference to their didactic impulse” (SPENCER, 1992, 10), the poetic quality of his theatre should also be taken into consideration.

If in *The Pope’s Wedding* human aggression and moral disintegration are suggested, in *Saved* unleashed brutality outrages the audience. Len and Pam, who are the protagonists, as well as all the other characters in the play, belong to the South London working class, being the product of their social background. Completely estranged from themselves, incapable of relating to others and devoid of humaneness, they embody moral emptiness which inevitably turns into reckless behaviour and beastliness. Bond’s criticism reaches its climax in the infamous park scene that shows a group of hooligan-like boys stoning to death Pam’s baby in the presence of an indifferent father. In Martin Esslin’s opinion, the scene represents “one of the key points in the moral structure” of the play (1968, 26), due to its great impact on the spectators who, as in the previous play, are forced to face an act of cruelty committed for the sake of cruelty. At the same time, the scene testifies to Bond’s belief in the power of the theatre to stimulate the audience’s critical attitude towards society by rendering ideas into touching concrete stage metaphors. As Katharine J. Worth points out, this shocking incident expresses the dramatist’s particular “way of suggesting inner deadness” (1973, 172) in a society that offers no alternative set of values and no life perspectives to the lower classes. Although the play focuses on the dreadful consequences of dehumanization, Bond also provides a counterexample which is incarnated by Len, the only character in the play who remains human and acts humanely. In this sense, it is worth mentioning

that he brings alienated people together, being able to show compassion for and understanding of others. Moreover, the final scene in which he is mending a broken chair while Pam and her parents are quietly involved in their routine activities emphasizes his role in reconciling people. This silent scene may also reinforce the significance of the title of the play.

As Bond believes that dramatic art should interpret reality rather than reproduce it mimetically, he adopts elements of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty in order to construct explicit and moving theatrical metaphors. In the plays that reinterpret historical and cultural topics he resorts to horror in order to provoke the audience's sensibility and get them judge what they see. In *Lear*, Shakespeare's play serves as a pretext for discussing his major theme: the abuse of power and irrational violence lead to the destruction of society. In such a context, Lear is a tyrannical king whom his two ruthless daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle, dispose of power by starting a cruel war. After becoming their prisoner, Lear is blinded, the use of the Oedipus motif having the same significance as the one in [Sophocles](#)'s tragedy. It is only in this state of blindness that Lear can see the truth about himself and the world. As violence is a large-scale phenomenon in the play, the characters endure tortures (Warrington's tongue is removed on Fontanelle's order, Lear's eyes are sucked out by a machine) and bloody scenes are depicted on stage (Fontanelle's autopsy). However, as customary with Bond, the display of cruelty and horror is part of a dense metaphoric language which characterizes his dramatic style. It should be noted that, in spite of the general destruction suggested by the dramatist, he ends his "teaching play" in an optimistic light showing clear-sighted Lear dismantling, at the cost of his life, the wall that he once built around his kingdom to protect his tyrannical regime.

In other plays, cannibalism, as an extreme form of aggression, represents a generic metaphor for human condition. In *Early Morning*, the queue scene in which the characters eat each other is highly suggestive from this point of view. At the same time, in Brechtian fashion, Bond's scenic images are based on the estrangement effect to offer the spectators the opportunity to detach themselves from the horror shown on stage and judge the events critically. His strategies to produce such an effect are diverse ranging from the juxtaposition of independent episodes and visual images to the suggestiveness of the bare stage (for instance the park in *Saved*). In addition, the pantomime techniques contributing to the surreal atmosphere in *Early Morning* or the use of oriental masks in *Narrow Road to the Deep North* remind the audience that they take part in a theatrical performance meant to tell the truth about the world.

By confronting spectators with absurd brutality, Bond transforms theatre in a form of art that invites people to change themselves and the world they live in. Although influenced by Brecht's theatrical aesthetic, he moves beyond epic principles creating a new dramatic language that is both violent and poetic.

## Conclusion

Brecht's epic theatre constituted a rich source of inspiration for the British dramatists who distinguished themselves by creating remarkable plays. From the most significant playwrights that bear the mark of the German epic style, John Arden and Edward Bond represent conscious moralists who believe in the political and social responsibility of the artist. By revealing the destructive contradictions of capitalist society, its inequalities and dehumanizing effect on people in complex and stylistically diverse plays, their works are emblematic for a new social and political drama that belongs to a very active and innovative period of modern British theatre.

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