

# **DRAMA** *Works*

## **Brecht Through Practice**

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## NOTES

1. At risk of upsetting probably the largest percentage of drama students - the girls - I have consistently used 'he' and 'him' throughout, taking my precedent from the word 'actor' which is now applied to both genders. Any of the exercises can of course be sex-changed to suit your students' requirements!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeni Whittaker has been a teacher, an examiner and a chief examiner of drama for many years. In fact, she pilot taught on the very first 'A'level exam in drama back in the mid-1970s and has been in the forefront of drama as an exam subject in one capacity or other ever since. Her other experience includes directing and performing professionally as well as adjudicating festivals and running a very large and active youth theatre. Since 1996, Jeni has been completely freelance, taking her workshops around schools and colleges all over the country. Her experience as a teacher makes her an ideal person to write a handbook especially for other teachers: she knows the problems of time and resources that teachers experience and can guarantee that all the exercises in this study programme actually work!

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## INTRODUCTION

It has become fashionable recently to run Brecht down and to state that with the retreat of Communism there is no further place for his methods in Western Theatre. At the same time, these same critics are happy to acknowledge theatre's debt to Brecht while consigning him to the historical past, a phenomenon that is interesting but finished.

It is certainly true that Brecht formulated many of his theories out of his own struggles to understand Communism and his perceived need to impose discipline on his own nature and artistic expression. The background from which Brecht's style emerged is important to understanding why Brecht comes up with the theories he does, but at the end of the day it is what his theatre proposes as an acting style that is our concern. Whatever the means by which he arrived at his theories, there is a recognisable style when these theories are put together into one body, called 'epic theatre', and this style is as valid and useful today as it ever was.

The epic style can be adapted to any form of theatre that puts a social or political message before the exploration of character. Once character is less important than message and the intricacies of human motive less intriguing than storytelling and the exploration of situation, you have Brechtian theatre.

The starting point of all great practitioners is the work of others and the state of theatre around them. Thus Stanislavski began from the prevalent melodrama and early attempts at realism performed by others, the failure of which made him see the need for a new type of actor, sincere, deserving of respect and totally dedicated to the exploration of truthful characterisation and human psychological motive. Brecht inherited a theatre world in which Stanislavskian naturalism was the accepted norm but which seemed to him woefully inadequate to express the social problems he saw all around him. More interesting by far to him were the experiments of such as Piscator, with whom he worked for a short time. Add to this a country in political ferment and you have all the ingredients to make Brecht the practitioner he was.

I will place the historical contexts and other influences more firmly as we go through the second section, in which I explore Brecht's theories through some of his plays. In the first section, we will explore Brecht's theories in their final state, always recognising that, unlike Stanislavski, Brecht does not have a clear System to follow which takes an actor on a path from A to B.

A few reminders for students to bear in mind before starting practical work on Brecht, along with the usual caveat - that when writing essays about Brecht, it is as valueless to trot out a list of practical work undertaken without explaining the theories, as it is to trot out theory without any reference to practice. Both are necessary.

1. First and foremost, to use Brecht as a theatre style is to work with political theatre in its broadest form.

2. A lot of Brecht's work is a tribute to the power of Stanislavski: he acknowledges how tempting it is for an actor to want to 'get into the skin of the part,' but it is precisely this seductive power that drives him to bombast against naturalistic theatre in which the audience "hang up their brains with their hats in the cloakroom," are sucked into "believing a lie" and, through sympathy with the characters, are uncritically caught up in the twists and turns of the events.

3. Despite this, Brecht is not an opposite to Stanislavski, as I find many students want to make him. He does not, for instance, want all characters to be stereotypes or unrealistic. In fact, for Brechtian theatre to work it is important that

the central characters are recognisable and life-like. The audience needs to know and understand them and so they must be rooted in reality. It is really only the 'baddies', the extreme characters through whom Brecht is making a political or social point, that ought to be stereotypes. Thus Grusha in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a 'real' honest hard-working servant girl but the Governor's Wife is a stereo-typed 'baddie', haughty, useless, selfish, strident. The acting styles can co-exist in the same piece of theatre because both characters are making statements to the audience, the one about the working class as perceived by Brecht, the other about the aristocracy.

4. All Brecht's theories make perfect sense if you remember the two essentials:

- a] The message must be clear, and
- b] The audience must remain critically aware.

I find all the techniques and theories hang on to one or other of these.

5. The main difficulty that students have is in separating Brecht's theories on acting and staging from his plays. Of course, his plays allowed him to explore his theories or, perhaps more likely, the plays dictated the need for a set of theories to accompany them. Can his theories be separated from his plays? Do the theories work on other material? The answer is 'yes' and it is because of this that Brecht is more than a product of his time, doomed to fade along with the Communist ideal. The fact that the theories stand apart from Communism and can work with any political or social message is Brecht's strength as a practitioner for today. Many parts of the first section of this handbook have practical suggestions in this area.

6. Like Stanislavski, Brecht's theories grew and changed out of practice. As Brecht's ideas cohered so his theories developed.

7. It is clear that the theories Brecht proposes are not a complete actor's training. Such theories as he has should run alongside common good practice for actors such as good vocal technique. Brecht's suggestions to actors on technique are not so different from those that Stanislavski propounds. Where they differ is in those theories where Stanislavski seeks to expose the workings of the inner soul of a person, which Brecht ignores completely. Instead, he concentrates on how to recognise outward signs such as a person might observe in the social structures around them. To clarify, Brecht might show you: 'Look, see how a man behaves when he is about to cheat another, his eyes ..., his mouth ... his voice ...etc.' whilst Stanislavski would be more interested in understanding the man's motives - why does he behave like that? The focus of attention, the purpose, is different. Stanislavski wants to know why it is so on a personal level - did the man have a difficult childhood, etc.? Brecht wants to know why he did it on a social level - why does a man do such a thing? What are the social ills that force him to cheat on his fellow? If such social conditions are prevalent in society, can we do anything about changing that society?

## THE FIRST LESSONS

Ideally, you should have started from a course in naturalism or Stanislavski but I recognise that for many teachers this is not practicable. If that is the case and you are plunging straight into Brecht, I think it is still necessary to give a short idea of Stanislavski. This is because so much of what Brecht does is in instinctive reaction to naturalism or in conscious rebellion against it. To understand where Brecht is coming from it is necessary to see why he fought so hard against naturalism, which he saw as deceitful because it wooed the audience into believing a lie. Worse still, the System tried to convince actors that they too were living a lie. Nothing irritated Brecht more than the idea that a whole system of acting was evolved which worked hard to carry sensible intelligent people, both actors and audience, out of their rational senses into a world of make-believe where reason and common-sense were put on hold.

Nonetheless, he realised the power of Stanislavski to enchant both actors and audience. He realised the temptation for an actor to wish to 'become' the character and to live the part as truthfully and realistically as possible. But if an actor 'becomes' a character and convinces an audience of sane intelligent people that for a few hours they have witnessed him suffering and living out his life in front of them, what does that achieve? You may answer 'escapism' or 'further understanding of the nature of Man through empathy', but escapism is never enough for Brecht nor does he believe in the universal similarity of Man, so what good is empathy since it is furthering a basic error?

Brecht wants a theatre that achieves something, that challenges and makes an audience think. An audience that is sucked into the lives of characters on stage is uncritical. It doesn't ask why does something happen; it merely accepts, maybe sheds a few tears, says 'that's life, that's how it is,' with a sigh and then goes about its daily business and forgets ultimately all about it. Nothing has changed about the audience's life by witnessing a naturalistic play and Brecht wants change. Why? Because he's surrounded by a sick society - Europe in the '20s and '30s with the Depression and the frightening growth of Fascism - and is searching for tools to enlighten people and to do something about it.

To help students realise the difference between accepting, on the one hand, and questioning, on the other, the plot of a play and the characters' lives and motivations, try the following exercises:

### Practical Work

- 1. Solo students volunteer to act out a typical moment of their day, e.g. their morning routine or going to bed. They are to do it as they would, i.e. visualising the geography of their rooms, not talking [one doesn't usually talk to oneself], reproducing what they do and relying on their own belief in what they are doing - this is why doing something familiar is important - to convince the audience of the reality of the performance.**

**Having seen a number of these, ask a few to repeat them, this time describing and commenting on everything they are doing as if the audience is a friend with whom they are sharing their thought**

processes. The tone in which this is done is entirely up to the student. It may be that some will 'put their actions under a microscope' - "Notice how I feel it necessary to brush each tooth separately...", or they may seek to make it amusing, objectifying themselves further, "Look how this geek spends ages arranging his hair parting. Does he think he'll attract the girls better this way? ..." Whatever way they choose to do it, it is the running commentary that is necessary. It will serve to objectify the performance and to concentrate on the outer actions and expression of the character rather than wondering, as in the first showing, what is going on inside the actor's head.

The conclusions to be pointed out are: if an audience is left to wonder and to work out what is going on it focuses the whole attention on the character and what is going on inside him. We are drawn into the inner life of the character. If the actor is dissociating himself from what he is doing by pointing things out to us, he is inviting objectivity. The link of being 'drawn in' is broken.

2. Here, in simplified form, is the beginning part of the plot of 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' by Brecht.

A servant girl in a grand court finds an abandoned baby during a violent uprising. Listening to the rebels' talk she realises the baby is the young son of the previous ruler, who has just been murdered. The rebel ruler has now just seized power, so the baby is clearly a threat to him and consequently in danger of his life. Despite the obvious danger, the servant girl takes the infant to save him from the immediate peril he is in. Their travels mean that the girl is always only just ahead of the enemy soldiers. She has to pretend the baby is her own son and when even that is not enough to divert suspicion from them she marries a farmer so as to pass the boy off as his son.

i] Act out the moment when the servant girl finds the baby, overhears the rebels and realises the baby is in danger. Make sure that your audience is caught up in the action, is afraid of what may happen and sympathises with the girl's dilemma.

ii] Act out the moment when, at the end of her tether, the girl realises she must marry a gross uncouth farmer whom she does not love in order to protect the child from suspicion. More sympathy will be gained for the girl if the audience comes to know that she was engaged to someone else before all this happened.

iii] Now repeat the first scene, with the following differences:

A narrator announces the scene and tells the audience what will happen.

The serving girl tells the audience all the pros and cons of taking the child.

Identify the moment when the girl makes her decision to take the child despite the dangers and disadvantages. Find a way of making this moment obvious to the audience.

**iv] Repeat the second scene in a similar way, i.e. using a narrator, sharing the pros and cons, making the moment of decision clear.**

**Notice that the audience, though silent, have a more intellectually active part to play in this process. Experiment with taking this a little further, perhaps by characters inviting discussion from the audience along the lines of 'Can you think of any reasons why I should not take the child?' etc.**

Make sure that the differences between the two variations of the scenes are fully discussed. They should at least notice the more active part from the audience and the fact that narration and direct address help the audience to see the actors just as actors. They are not 'being' the characters but are taking the first steps towards 'demonstration.' Better students may already be able to see that the narrator telling the audience what will happen takes away suspense and encourages the audience to look at the reasons why something happens. Dramatising the inner debate and identifying the moment of decision reminds the audience that we are all thinking beings with choices to do this thing or that thing throughout life. Making choices identifies us as human and reminds us of the power we have to change things; we are not governed by fate as naturalistic drama seems to suggest.

I am aware that these are tantalising ideas at this stage of the course and invite considerably more exploration and discussion. Each of these ideas is explored in greater detail further on, but a preliminary discussion which sets the students on the right paths of thought and therefore towards an understanding of where Brecht is coming from does no harm at this stage.

**3. The students need to be in pairs or threes. Choose one of the following scenarios for improvisation. Stress that they should simply perform as they would normally, without worrying about Brecht. The characters are naturalistic.**

**a] A teenager asks his parent/s if he can stay out all night at a party. It is near examtime and the parents refuse. The teenager becomes defiant and angry. The scene's resolution is up to the performers.**

**b] An old person makes a bit of trouble and causes embarrassment to the couple with whom he lives, one of whom is his son or daughter. The old parent's future becomes the subject of heated discussion.**

**c] Tempted by the goods on offer, a youngster shoplifts a number of them. He is suspected by the shopkeeper, but manages to pass the goods into the shopping bag of an innocent bystander.**



**After the performance of the scenes, each group will need to repeat their scene again, but this time as if they were telling a story. Each character describes what he is doing and why. It is better if they use the past tense and the third person for this exercise, but at this early stage of the course don't insist on it if they find it difficult. This technique becomes easier as they become more familiar with it through the rest of the course. For the moment it would be sufficient for the actors to be saying, [for example] 'I came into the room. I noticed Gran was a bit quiet so I asked her what was up.' Gran then picks up the story: 'I didn't know how to answer my daughter because...'**

There is a lot in the above exercises. Don't worry if they don't grasp everything straightaway. They will at least have got the beginnings of some ideas about the different acting style involved and the different process, in consequence, through which the actor is putting himself. Whether they have studied Stanislavski in some detail or have simply been involved in ordinary improvisation work throughout their school careers, their tendency will have been to perform in a manner as close to their perceptions of life as possible. By the end of this section they will at the very least have grasped:

1. that Brecht is non-naturalistic
2. that he invites a very different relationship between actor and audience
3. that both actor and audience are part of an ongoing critical and objective process which is active even during performance

## PART ONE: THE THEORIES IN PRACTICE

### 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 bombcrater 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; cat and mouse; song and dance;  
summer and winter; war and peace; hero and coward;  
rich and poor.**

**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.

## EXAGGERATION AND REALISM

Once it is understood that 'gest'<sup>1</sup> is something a Brechtian actor is using all the time, it will be up to each individual actor to decide the best way to help further the message through his character. Once the attitude to the play has been established, all the actors will quickly understand their characters' place in the scheme of things, whether they are 'goodies' or 'baddies', characters the audience sympathise with or who provoke the audience dislike. It may be necessary to exaggerate certain features of a character in order to invoke the right response. This seems to suggest that all Brechtian acting is pantomimic or stereotypical, but that is not the case.

A practical exercise helps show the difference at this point.

### Practical Work

**1. Ask for a couple of volunteers and place them on chairs facing each other. One is a doctor and one a patient.**

**The doctor is the kind of person who has more private patients than those on the National Health. He is more interested in the lifestyle his private practice has allowed him - his golf with others of his ilk, his holidays, his sleek car - than with his patients as people. This clinic is his one reluctant National Health one of the week and this is the last patient. He is in a hurry to get up to the Golf Club.**

**The patient is going under with the stress of his life. He has an alcoholic wife, too many children and he is out of work. He has difficulty sleeping and other stress-related problems. He has come to his doctor in genuine need of some help.**

**The actors' tasks are to convey clearly by selecting appropriate voice tones and gestures, body language, etc., their attitude to their character, so that the audience will be in no doubt as to how they are supposed to respond.**

**Warn the actors that at any moment in the scene you will clap your hands, and at that moment they are to swap characters - i.e. the actor playing the doctor becomes the patient and vice versa. Then they should continue the scene as seamlessly as possible.**

**2. Now try the scene with the 'attitude' slanted in a different direction. This time the doctor is the one with whom the audience should have sympathy. He is a hard-working sincere person who tries his best to give time to everyone. In consequence, he is overloaded with patients who all like him and some of whom abuse his tolerance. At the moment, the situation is that the clinic is already running late, there are huge numbers still waiting to be seen and the doctor is very aware that there may be some very sick people waiting to see him.**

**The patient is the type of person who feels that having paid his taxes like everyone else he is jolly well going to get his money's worth. He has come with a number of little complaints, none of which really need a doctor, e.g. needing an ear syringed, a splinter in a finger, a bruise on the thigh. He sees the doctor as a public servant and treats him as his own servant! He is the kind of person who might feel a little uncomfortable in the middle of the night and wouldn't hesitate to wake his doctor up to ask his advice!**

**Play the scene as above, with the same warning that on the clap of your hands they must swap roles and continue the scene as seamlessly as they can.**

It is important to discuss the findings of these scenes afterwards.

Point out that the process of selection is all part of 'gest.' As actors they are selecting the voice tones, facial expressions, mannerisms, etc. that convey a certain impression or series of impressions. Each gesture made by the character is weighted with the 'attitude' the actor has chosen to convey. That is 'gest' and it is happening all the time.

The role swapping addition is a reminder that the actor cannot 'be' the character but merely 'demonstrates' it. There is more exploration of this theory later. Probably there is no danger of 'being' the 'baddie' in each of these scenarios; the process of selecting unsympathetic characteristics tends to keep actors safely out of character. But there is more of a danger with the sympathetic character of 'getting into' the part. Waiting for the clap, the knowledge of the role swap, tends to prevent this happening.

This exercise shows the beginnings of the separation between exaggerated characters and realistic ones. The two rub along comfortably side by side in a Brechtian production because neither 'styles' have undergone the process of interiorisation that Stanislavski's System would demand. In fact, both are demonstrating rather than being, so there is no inconsistency. Later sections will make this clearer. It is just that, for the more sympathetic characters, the actors have decided to select those characteristics that will make a person very recognisable to an audience; there has been no need to exaggerate, because exaggeration will lose sympathy. The students will have noticed this themselves if any of the actors participating as the 'nice guys' in the above scenes overdid their bids for audience sympathy. If that happened they would have found the reverse to what they wanted happening: the audience loses sympathy if the character becomes pathetic.

**3. For the next exercise, you will need quite large groups if possible, around about seven or eight ideally. Devise a tableau of a courtroom scene thinking of ways of showing through body language and facial expression that the judge has been bribed, the jury has been rigged and the witness terrified into lying. The accused is innocent.**

**Encourage the students to pull out all the stops into cartoon-like and exaggerated body language. How should the innocent person look?**

**Now try a court scene where the accused is guilty but cocky because he knows his bosses have rigged things so that he will go free. The witness is telling the truth but everyone is reacting as if it is lies.**

**Develop this last tableau into three further ones, which show the progressive uncertainty of the same cocky accused as he realises that things are not going as swimmingly as he anticipated. Have his**



**powerful friends turned their backs on him?**

**Having worked out carefully in this way the 'attitude' of all the performers in the above piece, it might be worthwhile developing this into a full improvisation, using the device of clapping or blowing a whistle, to freeze frame any moment without prior warning. The audience could then comment on whether the gests of the various performers are clear enough.**

- 4. Now try an improvisation around one of the following situations:**
- a rock star being met from the 'plane by a group of reporters;**
  - a protest meeting for saving an ancient tree from being chopped down;**
  - bullying in the school playground.**

**With each of the situations the following should be tried:**

- a) Identify attitudes for every participant in the scene**
- b) Decide as a group which characters should be sympathetic to an audience.**
- c) Formulate a style for performing the scene which differentiates between characters with whom we sympathise and those we don't. Take care that these are clear.**
- d) Perform these a first time.**
- e) Now play with the situation. Change the attitudes of several of the participants and seek to put over a different message. For instance, if you made the rock star outrageously vain the first time and the reporters as a stereotypical grouping, try making the rock star shy and distressed by the lack of privacy, which should result in a still stereotypical grouping of reporters but ones who are putting over an even more extreme and unlikeable gest. Now try making one of the reporters into a sympathetic character.**

Discuss the findings to all these exercises. Particularly, at this stage, concentrate on the stylistic extremes that are needed. What works best to get a message over? They will have come up with a number of options. Sometimes a satirical funny cartoon-style will have worked to show, perhaps, the scrambling of the press or the posturings of a bureaucratic town council. More difficult is to strike the right notes for the sympathetic characters. I am sure that they will discover that the best approach is a no-nonsense practical down-to-earth sort of person, played strongly and with clear outlines but played out to the audience rather than internalised, so that we share the thought-processes and the decisions of the character.

## DEMONSTRATION AND EMOTION

The previous work on exaggeration, realism and gest leads us naturally on to the main feature of Brecht's acting style, which he calls 'demonstration.' An actor, he says, should not pretend to be anything else. He is simply a person presenting a character or a series of characters to the audience. There should be no attempt to convince an audience that he 'is' that person, instead everything is done openly, to remind the audience that the actor is a person quite separate from his character and, what is more, a person with his own opinion about the character he is portraying, an opinion which he does not disguise but, by selecting such features for presentation which confirm his attitude, he invites the audience to share the same opinion with him.

The key to demonstration is selection and rejection. Selection arises out of attitude. So the proper order for the Brechtian actor to take is:

1. Study the part in context with the play to discover:
  - a] the message of the whole play, i.e. the angle that the cast and the director together decide to use the play to illustrate
  - b] the attitude that their character or characters will need to display in order to serve this message best.
2. Decide what vocal features and physical characteristics would clarify the 'gest' of their character. Instead of building up a whole inner life for the character of, for instance, our hard-working doctor in the section on exaggeration and realism, the actor selects a patient but practical voice, soothing, quiet gestures and a tolerant facial expression, perhaps with a touch of carefully suppressed impatience to make us aware of how many are still in the waiting-room. The character is strong, assured but not wimpish. Knowing his attitude to the character, the gest he is displaying, gives the actor a firm platform upon which to build.
3. Decide which characteristics might need to be exaggerated for further emphasis in order to make a particular statement about the character. For instance, Brecht in 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' wanted to make a statement about how useless and impractical the aristocrats were. They therefore held their hands up in the air, waving them uselessly as if in a panic. These hands were further emphasised by being clothed in white gloves with long fingernails attached, which made them stand out further. The basic silly panic gesture of flapping hands is thus exaggerated and made into a statement, a gest, which invites an audience to despise the aristocrats for their impracticality.

### Practical Work

1. **Think of a still statue-freeze for the following characters. Note that I have had to add an adjective or description each time, in order to make clear the gest that each character should have for this exercise, a policeman on the take; an unsympathetic landlord; a poor woman out on the streets, desperate to protect her children from the cold and harm; a foolishly heroic fireman; a cheating cardsharp; someone professing innocence who is innocent; someone professing innocence who is not.**
2. **In pairs, now try still poses for the following emotional situations: a**

**boy proposing marriage to a reluctant girlfriend; someone lying to his partner, the other realising it; someone persuading somebody to do something against their will;**

**3. One person in each pair expresses a still pose of, in turn: jealousy; anger; affection; dislike.**

**Now repeat these, but with the partner deciding how they are going to receive the emotion, also in a still pose.**

In all these it is obvious, because there is no development, no action, that the statues are only displaying the outward signs. The actor is demonstrating : 'this is what someone looks like when they are about to tell a lie,' for instance. The audience is being invited to recognise the signs that are round them in daily life. Now ask the group how many of the statues they've just seen were gests, i.e. had an attitude displayed by the actor making the pose? With the last set of statues, those to do with emotions, I suspect this will be harder. We are out of the realms of clearcut stereotypes here. It may be necessary to know more of the situation. Therefore...

**4. Still in pairs, take one of the four emotions above and starting from the still picture already presented invent a scene which begins or ends with that pose. The actors will need first to decide what the scene is there to show and then to select the right vocal tones to accompany their characterisation. Thus it will be seen that just to do an ordinary naturalistic improvisation will not do; by having to think of a reason for the scene, a gest, the scene is moved from the realms of naturalism where we are invited to say, 'Oh yes, that is how life is! How sweet and touching!' to the realms of demonstration where we are being shown 'This is how someone who is fond of another behaves; how strange under the circumstances, how misplaced those feelings are' ... for example, ... or, perhaps, ... 'How utterly suitable, their affection is clearly mutual, they seem very suited, both are practical people ...' and so on.**

Once again, discuss after presentation of these scenes how clear the gest was. What further changes need to be made? Help the actors to realise that this kind of discussion and input from the whole group is very Brechtian and will help each individual actor to realise each gest.

The model that Brecht gives us for the actor/ demonstrator is his essay entitled 'The Street Scene.' Here he uses the idea of a witness of an accident 'demonstrating' to other passers-by his view of what happened and who is to blame. From it one can extract the three essentials for the Brechtian actor:

- I. He is presenting his opinion of what occurred, in order to sway people to his way of thinking.
- II. He makes it clear that he is merely reporting behaviour as he sees it, not giving a lifelike portrayal of character. He actively does not want the audience to be carried along with the excitement of the situation or with the brilliance of the portrayal. So a Brechtian actor may step out of character to comment even on his own performance: 'he walked like this, only much faster,' for instance.
- III. He makes it clear that he is repeating something that has happened in the past, not that is occurring now. This puts the action at one remove; the audience is not swept along.

**5. Ask volunteers from the class to describe something that has happened or that they have witnessed that day. It must be something they were not personally involved in. Once they have told it once, ask them to repeat the story, putting a certain amount of minimal characterisation into certain parts, but only in such a way as to give a particular slant to the tale. An example might be, the student has witnessed a teacher ticking off a fellow student. In the retelling, the witness might want to suggest that the student deserved his punishment because he was definitely 'lippy' and out of order. Or he might take a different stance and want to suggest that the teacher was irritable and unfair. Whichever slant he takes, he must select the appropriate voice tones, facial expressions and gestures to put this over. This should not be as a complete and rounded characterisation, though, but as it were as part of the narration, merely dropping in and out of character.**

**e.g. I saw Mr Fuller and Andy having a row today. .... Mr Fuller drew himself up like this [ demonstrates] only even more fearsome if you know what I mean and then he put on his really mean sarcastic voice.'Andrew, come over here this instant,' [This part characterised and then dropped again as the story is resumed.]**

**Hear a number of these until you are sure that the students have understood the point of the 'street scene' example.**

**6. Now try this exercise, which proves how an incident can be changed according to what the actors decide to select as the gests of their particular characters.**

**a) An old person is walking along the pavement. A young person is leaning against the wall.**

**Find two ways of presenting a scenario in which the old person trips and drops his shopping, e.g. one scenario showing the accident was the old person's fault in some way; the other showing that it was deliberately caused by the young person.**

**b) Two young people are creeping through a house late at night. Show two different reasons for this, one innocent and one guilty.**

**c) A person tries to persuade a trusting couple of animal lovers that the reason she wants the whole litter of Dalmatian puppies is because they would make such adorable pets. Present this in three ways: one in which the person is completely sincere, one in which she is 'Cruella deVille' and the third where it is the animal lovers who are tricking 'Cruella'!**

## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Brechtian theatre is narrative theatre. It tells a story, though not for the story's sake but for the light it can show on ourselves as human beings in our particular social situation. Already the social situation we find ourselves in is very different from the one that Brecht lived in. Brecht would say that we need different messages and a different type of theatre to suit our own particular needs. We should not get stuck in portraying the past but use the past only if it helps us understand and interpret our own period in time.

If you start the students with some simple exercises to lead into storytelling, you can quickly move them on into 'storytelling with a twist', the particular province of Brecht's 'epic' theatre.

### Practical Work

**1. Start them by sitting in a circle and doing a couple of rounds of telling a story around the group. The usual way of doing this is to move around the circle one by one but I find that students lose concentration quickly this way. It is better to have something like a beanbag or soft ball which the storyteller holds until he is ready to pass it on to someone at random in the circle. That way all must listen because no one knows who is going to be the next choice. Allow each person a section of the story with the instruction that the plot must be furthered in some way and it must make sense.**

After a round of this, discuss what makes a good story. Is it plenty of exciting events? Interesting characters? Make clear we are not talking about a novel here but the simple art of storytelling. Imagine the group are young children or members of a primitive tribe, used to the storyteller's craft as entertainer.

After this discussion, try one or two volunteers telling a fairytale or similar to the rest of the group. They must use their voice, facial expression and a certain amount of body language - though they can remain sitting - as part of their technique. See if afterwards the students can come up with a basic list of essential techniques for the storyteller's craft. This should include such things as 'direct address of the audience', 'making eye contact with individuals', as well as more obvious observations about vocal technique.

**2. Still in the circle, ask for volunteers to relate an incident from their day, or from their weekend, making it as riveting as possible and acting it out where appropriate. Where conversations are involved, the narrator should differentiate between speakers by some characterisation. Thus the narrator is dropping in and out of possibly more than one character.**

**3. Now divide the students into pairs, calling themselves A and B for convenience. A relates an incident to B. It is important that this is kept short, e.g. a visit to the dentist or getting ready with a friend to go out to a party, something that is quite contained. After the relation, B asks detailed questions of A. How old was the dentist? How tall? What kind of voice did he have? Were you nervous?**

**B now tells the story to the rest of the group in the third person and the past tense because, of course, he is relating something that happened to someone else at another time. 'Last weekend, Alice went to her friend Emily's house ....' B calls on members of the group to act out each part along with the narration, instructing at the same time, e.g. 'Emily is tall and thin. She has a rather breathy voice ... etc.'** If you have a large group, you will have to limit the playback of these narratives, as the exercise can take a very long time.

**4. In groups, choose a well-known story such as a fairytale. Characters are divided up amongst the group and it is fine for someone to have more than one character. Each actor decides, through group consultation, on the interpretation of his character, its gest, which is dictated by how the group want the audience to respond. A narrator is also appointed. The story is worked on and presented to show all the different forms of narrative techniques there are:**

**straight narration from the appointed narrator, directly out to the audience**

**some narration from the other members of the cast, who drop character to take up the story and then resume character again**

**'in character' relation of thought processes from members of the cast, either in the first or the third person, e.g. Jack: ' When I saw the height of the beanstalk, I was really scared I can tell you...' or, Jack: 'When Jack saw the height ... etc.'**

**sung narration - I wouldn't expect a group to include this without a lot of planning, but they need to know of its existence particularly as a Brechtian device.**

Discuss afterwards the different tones of narration that have emerged from this exercise. They should find that the familiarity of the story to the audience meant that they adopted a cooler, more detached narrative tone. An ironic tone rather than an excited what-will-happen-next-children-I-can't-wait-to-find-out one, comes closest to the Brecht ideal. Compare this with the findings from Exercises 1 and 2 of this section.

Part of the narrative technique in Brechtian theatre is interpretive. The actors as a group need to be able to find the essential message of a scene and to extract it. An audience needs to be informed of this 'message' at the outset of the scene, because that way they will look at the reasons why something happens rather than be carried along by events designed to surprise them. There is no surprise possible if you are told at the beginning of a scene: ' A murders B and is arrested for the crime. ' So since you are not waiting for *what* will happen you focus instead on *why*. Brecht wanted an audience that was as intellectually alert as his actors. The exclusion of the surprise element in this form of narrative technique confirms the need for the use of a more detached narrative voice.

**5. Divide the class up into fair-sized groups of around four or five. Ask each group to plan a tableau of an activity or a dramatic event. They present these in turn, while the other groups must first interpret what is happening and then give a caption to that picture, as if it were a photograph in a news story that needed a heading.**

**6. Here is a fun version of this which will challenge their inventive capacity! In this version, each group has a chance to pose another group without any explanation of what they are doing. It is fun to do this both as a completely random idea, i.e. the group doing the manipulation of the bodies having no masterplan, and where the groups have planned how they are going to place their victims! In this way you might have Group A placing the bodies of Group B into all sorts of positions, followed by Group B posing Group C, and so on, till everyone has had a turn. The group who have been placed must work out what they are doing, being inventive if it is a random positioning, and give themselves a caption. Other watching groups can do the same and all compare notes at the end.**

**7. Ask the groups to return to the fairytale or well-known story they explored earlier. This time they are to examine the structure of the story and divide it up into episodes. Each episode is to be given a caption which sums up that episode.**

**Note: in many old-fashioned childrens' stories, chapters would be headed like this and it may be worth directing their attention to such examples as they are very similar in effect to what they are trying to achieve. 'In which Eeyore loses a tail and Pooh finds it,' for instance.**

**8. Finish this section with a final exercise using the fairytale. For this, they may want to change from their previous choice, but I would advise that where possible they should stick to the same one. The focus of attention this time is to give the story a new slant or a new ending which brings the tale right up to date. An example would be James Thurber's retelling of Red Riding Hood, which has the young lady shooting the wolf dead with the gun she has hidden in her basket, because 'Little girls aren't as gullible as they used to be.'**

**I would expect this exercise to involve about a couple of hours' worth of planning. They need to include:**

- narration, a variety of types if possible as detailed above;**
- strong characters with clear individual gesticulations;**
- clear episodes or scenes with captions at the beginning of each one, either announced through narration or in writing.**

This exercise uses many epic theatre techniques and marks a point where the students are well on the way to understanding through practice what Brecht is about. It should be carefully written up after considerable discussion. Point out too that they are using in this exercise the particular Brechtian ideal of presenting the audience with something familiar and asking them to reassess it, to look at it in a new way. A Brechtian audience should take nothing for granted.

## THE USES OF HUMOUR.

Though early Brecht was rather too earnest for our tastes and too inclined to force us into a learning experience, as he matured as a practitioner he came to realise the need for humour as a leavening to his particular political style. 'Spass' or fun is a necessity; people must enjoy what they are doing to learn by it.

Humour is in fact one of the greatest legacies that Brecht has left us, but it is not the type which has an audience rolling in the aisles. Rather it is the intelligent humour of the satirist. Brecht's style of humour is to exaggerate or to ridicule, in order to expose the faults of a person or a system. His play 'Arturo Ui', which satirizes the rise to power of Hitler, is an example of how successful this can be.

To satirize successfully one has to be a good mimic first. The exercises are designed to satirize types of people as well as particular individuals. All should be able to manage the former, but not everyone will have the observational skills, coupled with the necessary confidence, to carry off the latter.

### Practical Work

**1. The students need to be in pairs, calling themselves A and B. Partners start by facing each other. A begins to speak about anything at all, perhaps simply describing something that has happened that day. B observes closely A's mannerisms and delivery. At a clap of the hands B takes over from A, either repeating the speech just listened to or carrying it on, inventing how it might continue. B mimics A as closely as possible. Swap over so that A has a turn at this too. See as many of these as there is time for.**

**Now ask each one in turn to exaggerate certain of their partners' features; this exaggeration can be as extreme as possible but must never lose recognisability.**

**2. Now try the same type of thing but with a person's walk. Ask partners to walk side by side, A first closely observing B. At first A matches B as closely as possible, observing every detail of his stride, the angle of his body, use of arms and head. Now A should start to exaggerate certain features of that walk until it is a caricature, though once again still recognisable.**

**Having observed these, give the Bs a chance for revenge. They'll need it!**

Note: please make clear the purpose of all these exercises and do not allow people to be upset by them. Caricature can be cruel and if you have sensitive blossoms in your group you may want to give them a choice about doing or just observing these exercises. Hopefully, though, most people will be game.

**3. Set the students a task to observe a well-known person on the T.V. It could be a politician, a T.V. presenter, a sports personality or similar. It should not be an actor playing a part. Encourage them to focus on people who are being themselves. They are to present a caricature of that person at the next drama lesson.**



**4. Give each student one of the following characters to use as a stimulus:**

**Jack Flash, a car-salesman; Dainty Fidget, a beautician; Sid Slime, a conman; Harry Bumptious, a yuppie; Ted Tedious, a pub bore; Lucy Luscious, a bar-maid; Veronica Vigor, a feminist; Cedric Haw-Haw, a landowner; Freda Fearless, a do-gooder; Alfie Halftruth, a news-reporter; Fluffy Giggleswick, a bimbo; .... and so on! Do have fun adding to this list with your students!**

**Each student needs to develop their stereotype first, working on all the outward signs that make that character both instantly recognisable and comic. The actors' attitudes to their characters are mocking.**

**When they have developed the appropriate voice, gestures, stance and walk of their characters, have them work in groups in very everyday situations first, such as the pub at Sunday lunchtime, waiting for the bus, the doctor's surgery, and so on.**

**End up with a scene in which one or more of these characters are contrasted with ordinary, down-to-earth people in a way that satirises or shows up the stereotypes to their detriment. The audience, here, is being invited to laugh at the caricatures but ultimately to recognise and condemn them. This last is very important.**

**5. Finally, in this section, find ways of caricaturing groups of people in order for an audience to firstly recognise them, then to laugh at them but always to end up by condemning their behaviour or what they stand for. Satire of this type works best when contrasted with 'real' people, with whom we have sympathy. Examples might be:**

**a group of journalists hounding the victim of some tragedy;**

**a group of politicians at a political hustings contrasted with a person wondering who to vote for;**

**a group of doctors on a ward round and someone awaiting an operation;**

**a group of nightclubbers on holiday abroad and a couple of honeymooners.**

**There are many other 'groups' that could be caricatured in this way: secretaries, policemen, social workers, animal rights protesters, T.V. personalities, schoolteachers, etc. etc.....**

**Make sure that the students are working with these caricatures with a view to stressing a particular feature they want their audience to notice and to condemn, i.e. they are searching for a gest, a particular attitude. It could be the nosiness of journalists they want to pick out, or the lack of sincerity of politicians.**

## NOT ...BUT, THE IDENTIFICATION OF CHOICE

Brecht wanted to emphasise the free will of every human being to choose his own path in life. He hated the suggestion inherent in so much of our drama that a person's fate is inescapable, written in the stars, ordained by the gods: Oedipus, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar. Instead he believed that there are many times in every person's life when they could choose to do one thing or another. This is the moment of 'not ... but', in other words, the moment when T choose to do 'not' this 'but' that. Brecht's plays are full of such moments and it is up to the actor to find a way of emphasising them in order to point out to the audience that such choices are common in everyday life and are important to recognise, act upon and live by, without regrets.

### Practical Work

**1. Start with some silent mimed situations first. The students are working alone. Tell them that each situation explores that moment of hesitation before making a decision. Here are some ideas.**

**A person in two minds about:**

**making a difficult phonecall**

**answering the door to an angry visitor**

**doing some work or a preferred leisure activity**

**Each student could come up with their own invention along these lines to show.**

**2. In pairs or threesomes, and with speech this time, find a way of emphasising the difficult decision between:**

**which of two suitors to take;**

**whether to accept the offer of the boring job with the large salary or the more exciting but less remunerative one;**

**whether to buy the sensible longlasting outfit to wear or the expensive fashionable one-off.**

These are start-off ideas; I am sure the students will come up with their own.

The important thing to leave them with before moving to the next section is the understanding of the necessity to point the moment of decision in some way. Discuss the variety of ways this can be done:

silently, following the thought-process through facial expressions;

by talking things through with the audience as confidantes - in this case, is it better if any other action on stage is frozen?;

through showing the outcome of both decisions in quick tableau-form so that the audience understand the choices visually.

Any other suggestions?

## VERFREMDUNGSEFFEKT- MAKING STRANGE

Much of what we have covered so far has built in Verfremdung already. But let's start with a definition. The German word means 'effect of making strange.' Over the years, this has been translated variously as 'Alienation effect,' [shortened to the 'A' effect], 'distancing', 'estranging' or called simply 'the 'V'effekt [shortened from Verfremdungseffekt]. Personally, I prefer 'making strange' as being more literally what Brecht intended. 'Alienation' has the connotation of 'putting someone off' and 'distancing' too has rather cold inferences.

So, if 'making strange' is what Brecht intended, what is it for and how is it achieved?

To answer the first question: Brecht wanted an active type of theatre that could be used as a tool for changing our flawed society. To achieve this goal, first one needs to educate audiences [and actors] that there is indeed a need for change. So people and events, the recognisable phenomena, institutions and trends of society need to be held up for display in such a way that an audience both recognises the reality of what they are seeing and sees it in a different light. Nothing should escape this treatment. We are products, said Brecht, of the scientific age. Therefore we should look at life critically and with the cool rational eye of the scientist. 'Ah,' we are supposed to say, 'so that is how a chair works! An interesting design but is it effective? Can it be bettered?' And so on up to, ' Ah! That is how the legal system works ... can it be bettered?' The whole fabric of our modern life is thus put under the microscope. Nothing is taken for granted. All must be re-examined.

### **Practical Work**

**1. Class to sit in a circle facing outwards. The teacher has a number of everyday objects covered up on a tray in the centre of the circle. Possibilities are:**

**a fork; a pen; a torch; a shoehorn; a hair band; a bottle opener ... etc.**

**Individuals are called up and given an object which no one in the circle sees. The volunteers then take turns describing their object aloud to the class, as if they were aliens reporting back to their spaceship about their findings on the strange planet on which they've landed. Volunteers do not 'know' what an object is used for. This means that they will have to make 'guesses' from the look of the thing and its possible functions. Much hilarity can result from this but point out at the end that by looking at everyday objects in this way they are going through the process of 'making strange.' It is interesting how one starts to see everything afresh and begins to see how odd objects are that were previously taken for granted.**

**2. Try the same process, but this time with volunteers describing to the group - who are now facing inwards and thus able to see - other things of their choice, which they invite the group to touch and experience, examine and hazard guesses about. This should be rather like an alien form of the Antique Roadshow in style.**

**3. Volunteers to describe a social phenomenon in the same way, as if reporting back to their alien friends their observations of human behaviour. Examples could be:**

**smoking; sunbathing; watching T.V. ; a cricket match.**

**4. Keeping this spirit of satirical observation, divide the class into groups and ask them to dramatise one of these social phenomena in the following way:**

**a narrator from a distant planet describes a phenomenon he has observed on earth and captured on film. The characters are, consequently, the 'alien' reporter and the human beings on film. The film can be paused, fast-forwarded, run-back and repeated but at all times the 'reporter' is commenting and pointing out particular features for special attention. This too can be hysterical!**

Because of this desire to make things strange, Brecht found a need for a very different theatre style than the accepted theatre conventions of his time, in which naturalism was 'king' but which also included such phenomena as the American Hollywood musical and traditional opera, both of which revolted Brecht in different ways. Whereas he hated how naturalism tried to convince audiences that they were watching a true occurrence happening in front of their eyes, clearly a lie, he also hated the way a musical or an opera slid from speech into song as if it were natural and seamless, as if people commonly said, 'I love you' and broke into song about it without pausing for breath! He saw both as equally deceitful. These types of theatre are equally trying to 'pull the wool' over peoples' eyes mainly through the glitz or the paraphernalia of theatre which conspires to 'cover-up' scene changes, costume changes, the altering of the actor's face into the face of the character he is playing, in other words all the mechanics of the theatre. Most theatre styles try to pretend these things aren't happening and seek to keep an audience literally 'in the dark' in order to finish the illusion.

This is why Brecht sought to remind an audience all the time that they are in a theatre, surrounded by artificial and mechanical things like lights and scenery and curtains, as well as actors who have lives other than those of their characters. An audience in the scientific age need to be aware of all the facts and must not allow any deceptions. So the audience are 'in the light' both symbolically and literally, scene changes are not hidden, lights are visible, costumes may be minimal and reveal parts of the actors' real clothes underneath, or may be changed in front of the audience.

A very different style of acting is required too. Some of this has already been explored and much can be surmised from the work already done. An actor needs to be:

- a] clear both in intention and performance, hence the use of 'gest' which is both clarity of outline and clarity of intention - gesture + attitude.
- b] sufficiently detached from his character to be 'demonstrating' rather than 'being' the person
- c] committed to the political or social message he is conveying at the same time as being able to be witty, detached and satirical in the performance of it.

Brecht knew how difficult it was for actors to avoid falling into the trap of the naturalistic style. Actors ache to feel what their characters feel, to become thoroughly immersed in the role; they like losing themselves. Much of the work Brecht proposes for actors to avoid falling into naturalism can be seen as an acknowledgement of the power and the temptation of Stanislavski. Maybe it is much easier to surrender one's self as an actor [despite the enormous hard work it takes to do this properly via the System] than it is to remain coolly outside the part, able to comment on it as well as showing it, able to keep witty, funny and slick. Students often think, mistakenly, that Brechtian acting is easy. Don't let them be so deceived!

The rest of this section, I would like to devote to the kind of rehearsal techniques that Brecht used to help actors keep out of naturalism.

One method was to ask actors to swap roles with each other. This had the effect of forcing the actor to look at his own part in a fresh way - it literally makes the actor's part 'strange' to him. He will notice the different emphases another player makes, the different nuances and interpretations and say to himself, 'Oh, I hadn't thought of that line in that way' or, 'I hadn't seen the character as being ....' This is all good, in Brechtian terms.

Brecht liked his actors to be on their toes and versatile. He also liked to see people playing against type. "Not all cooks are fat," he said, but also, not all heroines are beautiful. In fact he favoured plain sensible heroines and down-to-earth practical heroes.

The next exercise keeps people on their toes and versatile as they change from character to character:

**5. Ask for a brave volunteer to sit on a chair alone in front of the rest of the class. Give him a subject to talk about, such as 'eating' or 'music' or 'getting up in the morning.' The subject needs to be broad enough to have a number of different 'interpretations' according to character. The volunteer picks a character in which to start talking about his subject. Because the character is a 'type', he will have an attitude to the subject, e.g. a gourmet talking about his love of rich and beautifully prepared food.**

On the clap of the teacher's hands, the volunteer changes character. But he retains the same subject matter. Perhaps he becomes a slob, talking about how he eats nothing but greasy fast-food and takeaways, etc.

Three claps, in other words three changes of character, are enough for all but the most confident student. You will find that just waiting for the clap, talking and at the same time planning the next character in the head, is enough to keep the actor detached, as well as testing their versatility.

6. Remind them of an earlier exercise in the section on 'Gest', the one with the doctor and patient, swapping roles on the clap of the hands. You could repeat that exercise here, this time with the emphasis on roleswapping and the reason for it, more than on gest.

More interesting would be to change the situation. Any pair scene will do for this; if they know the clap is coming, that will keep them from becoming too involved. Perhaps make the scene a very emotional one, so that the added ingredient of having to demonstrate emotion is part of the challenge. Some ideas might be:

someone trying to convince another to do something against their will [such as stealing money from their employer];

someone trying to convince another to run away from the scene of a crime before the arrival of the police. There is some reason why that person does not want to leave.

Two friends. One upbraids the other for letting out the secret with which he was entrusted.

Role swapping was one rehearsal technique, designed to keep actors from empathising with their parts as well as helping them see their roles from a different perspective. Another was distancing the role by describing all the actions a character makes in the third person and the past tense, in other words the narrative tense. This has been used before, in the opening section and the section on narrative techniques, but not dwelt on or used as a technique in its own right. Of all the exercises, I find this one the most effective for single-handedly demonstrating to students what is meant by Verfremdungseffekt. They really experience the process through trying it out and the fact that they find it difficult to do seems to have the bonus of helping them to see the Brechtian actor as perhaps having to work as hard as 'normal' actors after all!

7. Divide the class into pairs. If there is an odd number, there will have to be one threesome, but there is such a lot to concentrate on in this exercise that it is best to use this only as a reluctant option of necessity. Give them a deliberately emotional scene. Any of the following will do:

A has come to break off his relationship with B

A has to announce that B's father, child, or emotional equivalent has been badly injured in a car accident

**A has to break gently to B that he has cancer or similar - this could be a threesome with B's partner, C, also receiving the news**

**B has to fire A, who has little prospect of being employed elsewhere**

**B in some way betrays the trust A has in him**

**B is trapped behind a rock-fall; A has been trying to reach him.**

**Each can hear each other clearly though the fall of rubble, but now A must go to find help and time is running out as B is short of air. This is another one that could involve a third if necessary.**

**Any other situations that involve strong emotions can of course be added to the list.**

**This exercise has three stages to it:**

**Stage One.**

**For the moment, tell them to forget Brecht and just to enjoy playing the scene as naturalistically as they like. Allow them to use their emotions and explore them fully. In fact, I think it is important that they are aware of the range of emotions needed for their scene and that the scenes are moving.**

**Stage Two.**

**Ask them to identify the most emotional moment, the climax of their scene, or at the very least the part of the scene they are enjoying playing the most. Then ask them to repeat this brief section a number of times, until they know what they are doing and saying in that section. Tell them it is like fixing this part as a script. They need to know exactly what they're doing.**

**In fact, interestingly enough, I think you'll find that already the very act of repetition has started to distance them from their characters, because they have not gone through the Stanislavski process of identifying with their characters and building their emotional life from the inside. Don't distract them with this fact at this stage, though. Leave it till you recap the whole process for their notes.**

**Stage Three.**

**Now that they are certain of what they do and what they say in their extract, ask them to repeat that section again, this time speaking all their stage directions. Tell them they cannot make a move without describing it in the third person and the past tense. Not even a twitch of the finger must go unreported.**

**Make sure they fully understand what they are doing by giving them an example first, showing the difference between the lines they have practiced saying and the actions they make:**

**e.g. A: She came in and sat down. 'Hello. Did you enjoy yourself last night?'**

**B: She glanced at her quickly and ran her fingers through her hair. 'Yes, it was great ...' etc.'**

**The words are spoken much as they were in the practices. Intonation will give the emotion of what is being said. But the emotion will be broken off because of the interruptions in the form of 'speaking the stage directions.' The concentration needed to do this properly is incredible. It must be done strictly - interrupt and remind them if they make a move without describing it - and it will drive them mad at first. They will complain that it slows the scene up, that they can't act properly, that it destroys their feeling for the characters, which is precisely the point of course.**

After you have seen some of all the scenes - I feel it is important in this exercise to experience both doing and watching it - invite comments. Hopefully they will be able to come up with:

As actors:

- a) It makes them focus on what they are doing.
- b) It prevents them empathising with their character, forcing them to look at themselves from the outside [ It makes them look at themselves 'strangely'.]
- c) Because of the tedium of describing every one of their movements and gestures, it makes them whittle down their movements to just the essentials, thus clarifying the outlines of their acting.

As audience:

- a) It focuses the audience attention on why people do things, how people behave in emotional situations. The narrative voice tells the audience what they should be looking at. The audience is kept 'scientific.'
- b) It stops audience identification with the character and the moment. Audience is kept at a distance.
- c) We are kept aware of the actors as actors.

Despite the long-windedness of such an exercise, it is strangely interesting to watch and sometimes even quite beautiful and, ironically, moving, one of the paradoxes that often occurs as a side effect of Brecht's work. I wouldn't stress this to the students though, unless it comes up! It may confuse!

Do remind the students that this, along with the other exercises in this section, is a rehearsal technique for a cast working on a text. I do find, however, it works rather well as a memorable exercise on Verfremdungseffekt in its own right.



## THE USE OF MASKS

A whole book could be written at this point, full of practical exploratory work on the use of masks alone. It cannot be done in the time available but one or two brief exercises will help students understand some of the strictures and understand too the adaptations an actor has to make when using a mask.

Students could make masks themselves, or if you don't want to spend time doing that, then theatre hire shops, party shops, even toyshops have cheap plain white masks that cover the whole face. Brecht tended to use the half-mask, which leaves the mouth free for speaking. The above-mentioned masks can easily be cut just below the nose and actually look very effective.

The first point that needs to be made, however obvious, is that the actor is covering his face. A huge area of expressiveness is consequently taken away from his repertoire. The result is that far more importance is attached to his body-language, which must compensate both in expressiveness and in clarity.

Secondly, one cannot act naturalistically with a mask on. For a start, masks lose their effectiveness even viewed side on, so a kind of stylised facing front, which allows only a few degrees of angling the head in any direction, becomes necessary.

### Practical Work

**1. Ask the students to hold their mask on their lap and to sit quietly looking at it, emptying themselves, before donning the mask.**

**2. They should take turns making an entrance, making sure that they pause immediately on their entrance to 'clock' the audience full face, before proceeding across the stage, then 'clock' them again before exiting. This 'clocking', which is the pause to allow the audience to register the mask, and to give it a character dependent on a subconscious reading of the actor's body language, is a very important part of all mask-work.**

**Check that the actor is not losing their character by turning too far from the frontal position. The students will quickly realise this themselves by watching each other.**

Many of these exercises are good for enhancing and strengthening clear and definite body language. This is an important feature of any work on Brecht because of the clarity needed for the language of gest.

**3. Divide the group in half, half to watch and half to perform. Each person, wearing his mask, makes an entrance and then stays on stage until the teacher stops the action and asks the groups to swap over. Their task is to try to attract the audience to look at them rather than at anyone else on the stage. They can use any means except speech or moving out of the performance area. But, because of their mask they will have to face front.**

Discuss the findings to this. Stealing the focus from each other is harder than it may sound. An audience may be more attracted to stillness or strong slow movements. The results are often interesting.

**4. Now give each member of the group an adjective on which to base their body-language. Only the individual will know his own 'characteristic'. Examples might be:**

**shy; angry; confident; bossy; aggressive; happy; lazy;  
stupid;**

**Bring them on , a small number at a time, so that they have to make an entrance in their character. Tell them to stand and wait and ... the audition will happen very soon, or the doctor will be with them shortly, or the guide will soon be there to show them round**

**...whatever**

**Observe their interaction while they wait.**

**After a couple of minutes, see if the observers can guess the characters.**

**Now, before moving onto the next group, allow them to speak and interact properly in character. Stop them every time they forget to face front.**

Masks are only a marginal item in Brechtian theatre but they can be used for a number of reasons:

1. As a Verfremdungseffekt technique, to make us look at a person in a different way, or to put him at one further remove from us.
2. To emphasise the gest of a character or group of characters, for instance giving all the aristocrats in 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' masks with white faces, and supercilious raised eyebrows.
3. As a means for a small number of actors to take on many parts. In this case, the mask is a quick way of an actor changing character, though that mask ought still to have an expression which fits with the gest of the character.

## TEAMWORK

Even more than Stanislavski, the Brechtian method of approaching a play is through concerted teamwork. There is no going back home and working on the internal characterisation. Instead much of the preparation for a play is through working together as a group. First and foremost is the group commitment to a political standpoint and a desire to convey a message or a different view of society to the audience.

Keeping an audience intellectually alert demands an attitude to the audience which is far more active than that held by the Stanislavskian actor. The latter spends much of his creative life creating an illusion for an audience [without whom his art is meaningless] whilst at the same time seeking to pretend they do not exist. Stanislavski talks of tackling an actor's fear of the audience and copes with it by cutting them off from the actor, pretending they are not there by making them into the fourth wall.

The Brechtian actor has to be very brave; he must 'see' the audience, make eye-contact with individuals, challenge them, share jokes with them, invite derision or sympathy for the characters, even those they are playing themselves. This could be a very frightening experience and certainly is a very exposed one, which would make a tentative actor vulnerable.

Nonetheless, there is comfort in the shared experience, the shared ethic and the composite, slick style that the team working on the play together should have established. Grounded in the shared enthusiasm for their message, the rehearsal period will come up with a style that is extrovert, challenging, direct, dextrous, often comic and always sharp-edged and clearcut. Certain types of teamgames will help to establish that style and give a composite feel to any finished piece.

### **Practical Work**

- 1. Stand in a circle and imagine a ball, which is given mimed 'reality' by throwing, rolling, bouncing it around and across the circle. Change the size and consequent speed of the ball. Add a sound like 'Bap', which bounces nicely, and helps the visualisation.**
- 2. Turn this into various ball games:**

**tennis in pairs**

**basketball or netball, dividing the class into two teams**

**football if there is sufficient space**

**Concentration on the 'ball' is what gives this focus and group cohesion. We need to be able to follow the imaginary ball at all times.**

- 3. Give the whole group a large-scale situation, such as a gym, a village fete, a hospital, a factory, an office ... etc. Start a couple off by giving them characters that would fit in this situation, e.g. the vicar and Mr Peabody with his giant marrow at the vegetable judging competition at the village fete.**

They act for a little and then introduce other characters by saying - in character - e.g. 'But oh look, here are the W.I. about to give their aerobics display', or 'Here are the proud owners of the most talented pets' etc. As seamlessly as possible, other members of the group respond voluntarily to the suggestion and come into the scene so that there is no break in the 'entertainment.' This must carry on, with each new set of incomers throwing out the suggestion for the next person or group of people to join in, until the whole class is involved.

4. Another idea is to divide the class up into threes, fours, or whatever numbers you can manage and start the first set off on an improvisation. Something with plenty of comic potential is best, with room for many stereotypes, e.g.:

the village fete [again];            the debutante's ball;  
the old folk's tea-party, etc.

At any moment you will clap your hands. The first group freeze and the next one takes over, slipping into the exact positions of the first group, so that they carry the scene on as seamlessly as possible.

5. I used this particular exercise in the Stanislavski handbook as well, but it doesn't matter. It works equally well here, because it is an exercise that develops group sensitivity whatever the stimulus or circumstances.

The group moves around the room in a strict rhythm, absolutely together. No leader is decided for this exercise but you tell them that you want them to stop moving at exactly the same time. Then tell them you want them to start moving again at the same time. Try this several times. You will be surprised how quickly they manage it. They always concentrate very hard with this and derive immense satisfaction from their success. You can then give them more complicated sequences to achieve, such as:

stop; sit down; lie down; sit up; stand up; walk; stop.

6. End off this section with a whole group improvisation which involves everyone listening and co-operating. Stress that you, as the audience, want to understand what is happening, so that this will mean that everyone must be listening to what is going on as well as performing, so as to give focus to important or dramatic happenings. They will need to be unselfish and not hog the attention all the time; equally, they will need to take the focus if nothing much seems to be happening. You may need several attempts before they learn how to do this; it takes specially highly-developed antennae in the group. Ideas for this could be:

the casualty ward;    the school playground;    the fairground

## USING THE THEORIES: A FINAL GROUP PROJECT

This ends the first half of this study programme. It may be that you want with your group to use all these techniques in a final project, which the group devise themselves. If this is the case, I would suggest the following as a starting point:

### **Practical Work**

**Encourage them to scour the newspapers for a story that is current, likely to stir up opinion and, preferably, where opinion and interpretation have been divided. Something like the Louise Woodward case, where no one will ever really know the complete facts, is ideal. Politicians, allegations of sleaze and denials is another area full of potential. There is always plenty about.**

**They should try to come up with a piece of around ten minutes, using as many techniques as possible:**

**the different styles of narration, including song if possible  
gestic stage pictures freezeframing and commentary clear  
gestic characters  
comic stereotyping versus more sympathetic realistic  
characters at least one moment of choice for a character a  
message, a slant or at least a different way of looking at an  
event.**

**The ending may be heavily leading the audience in a particular direction or may leave the matter open to debate; either would be acceptable.**

## PART TWO: BRECHT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Brecht cannot be studied as a practitioner without some study of his plays, in which the theories are explored and find their justification.

Even in his early plays Brecht shows that he is critical of the world around him. Written in the early 1920s, such plays as 'Baal' focus on a sick and decaying society where morals are lax and people drift aimlessly from one petty social crime to another.

The post-First World War period in Germany was full of discontented drifters, people who had fought for Germany and felt that the Versailles Treaty and the loss of the war was unfair to them and their country. There was an atmosphere of hopelessness and unrest. Many little political parties sprang up, of which at first Hitler's National Socialist Party was just one. Brecht was not yet affiliated to any particular party. Instead he looked around him at his unhappy country where the rich in the early 1920s lived a frantic life of pleasure, champagne, nightclubs and dancing while the poor seemed to have nothing to which to look forward and no strong political leader to reassure them.

'Baal' comments on this society rather than proposing any change. Baal himself drifts from one woman to another, preying on rich and poor with equal callousness. He lives by impulse, even killing his 'best friend' on a whim because he sees him flirting with a girl with whom Baal has from time to time associated. The messages of the play all seem to be about 'going with the flow', yielding to nature, but the nature of man is shown to be little more than bestial.

The play is a young man's vision of his world, cynical and self-indulgent. Like Baal himself, Brecht is drifting and rootless, looking for a purpose in life and failing to find it. Society, he sees, is sick but he has not yet found a way of changing it.

At this early period of Brecht's writing, he was heavily influenced by Erwin Piscator, with whom for a short time he worked. Piscator showed him:

1. that a playtext was not sacred - Piscator used to manipulate texts to suit his own theories.
2. that film and other methods could be combined with live action to give greater impact to the message of a play.
3. that social and political concerns were proper ones for the theatre to have.

From Piscator, Brecht adapted many ideas to formulate the style that later became known as 'epic theatre'. But where Piscator became more and more enamoured of a kind of multi-collage effect using mechanical/ technical stage effects, film, cartoon animation, and so on - often, one gathers from contemporary accounts, swamping the actors - Brecht did not fall into this trap. He felt strongly that the weight of the message should be carried by the acting and that the message was so important that the utmost clarity in putting it over was essential.

'Baal' shows some of the techniques that are associated with Brecht and the epic style, although he had not yet coined that phrase:

1. Song that breaks up the action, creating the episodic style typical of epic theatre, where each scene stands on its own.
2. In the songs, Baal often tells us a summary of what is to come in the following scene, thus taking away surprise and helping us focus on why something happens.
3. Every attempt is made, says Brecht, to prevent the audience being "fobbed off with an invitation to feel sympathetically, to fuse with the hero ..." The seeds of Verfremdungseffekt are indicated here.

In the mid-1920s, Brecht started to read 'Das Kapital' by Karl Marx and through it found the purpose he had been seeking. Society was sick - that he'd understood and demonstrated - and it seemed to him self-evident that Communism with its stringent disciplines and its focus on 'everything for the greater good of everybody' was the answer to the moral laxness, the inequalities between rich and poor and the corruptions in institutions such as the police and the lawcourts that he saw all around him. The world needed changing; Communism could change it; and the theatre could be a potent tool in its service.

This leads us onto an exploration of the epic style as it began to be formulated in this middle period of his writing, the period in which he embraced Marxism. We will study, in a practical way, two of the didactic short plays of the period, 'He Who Says Yes' and 'The Measures Taken.' The latter play, particularly, is useful as a model of the epic style of acting.

In both plays, there are many features that have become familiar as epic staging techniques. There is constant change of scene without 'real' scenery and the use of the most basic props only. Thus the audience is not 'kidded' into believing that what they are watching is anything more than a 'demonstration.' In addition, in 'The Measures Taken', we are kept stringently at one remove and reminded throughout, by the constant interruptions of the sung Control Chorus, to submit each scene to our judgement and reason. This is the play in which the Control Chorus sings the famous message, applicable to all of Brecht's work: 'Change the world: it needs it!'

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

When Brecht first came across Communism, through reading Karl Marx, he was like many new converts to a cause: over-enthusiastic to the point of tediousness! He tried to force his naturally undisciplined nature to the rigour of his new creed. This spilled over into his writing style. His earlier style was sprawling, lacking discipline and structure. His view of humanity was pessimistic and even nihilistic, heavily influenced by the First World War that he had just been through as a medical orderly and the post-war retribution that the Versailles Treaty imposed on Germany, with its consequent bitterness and low morale. Communism seemed to him a very sensible answer to the problems besetting Europe, so sharply divided in the 1920s between the very rich and the very poor, because of Marx's proposals about the communal ownership of property with its inevitable abolition of the class system and redistribution of wealth.

Brecht accepted, in theory, that tough measures would need to be taken in order for the world to reach the ideal state of Communism, but uses his plays of this period, the 1920s, to test how far he would be prepared to go. If death or fighting is necessary to obtain ultimately that longed-for ideal, does the end justify the means? Can he, Brecht, reconcile his committed pacifism with the kind of means that might be necessary to overcome the present system and to re-educate people into the new state of Communism? If some of the answers he comes up with - the death of a child in 'He Who Says Yes' and the death of the Young Comrade in 'The Measures Taken' seem extreme [and the Communist Party themselves certainly thought so], this is because he is forcing himself to face up to the harshest test-cases he can imagine.

The plays of this period, Brecht called 'Lehrstucke', which means both teaching pieces and learning pieces. They were designed to educate schoolchildren and workers into Communism, either through participation in them as actors or by being a member of the audience. The rigorous discipline with which Brecht curtailed his style to make it practical, spare, simple and clear give the plays their unique style.

Students, I find, don't take to these plays, so it is important to stress a number of things before starting the work on them:

- a] Remember they were written for schoolchildren, in the case of 'He Who Says Yes', or factory workers, in the case of 'The Measures Taken', not professional actors.
- b] Large chunks of them would be sung. 'He Who Says Yes'<sup>1</sup> had music written by Kurt Weill, 'The Measures Taken', music by Hans Eisler. Challenge the students to write down the lyrics of some of the music currently in the charts - the words on their own read back just as repetitively and simplistically.
- c] We are studying them in order to practice the use of epic theatre techniques. These plays formed many of the techniques that Brecht carried over into his final, mellower period of writing. They are consequently very useful aids to students of Brecht.



## WORK ON 'HE WHO SAYS YES.'

The storyline of the play is simple and the whole thing is a parable to test a communist principle, that of the individual being less important than the community.

A terrible disease is killing people in an area cut off by mountains. Three students and their teacher volunteer to cross the difficult mountain pass to reach the city where they may buy medicine to bring back and save their own region. The journey, it is stressed, is dangerous. A young boy insists on accompanying the expedition. The teacher tries to put him off, warning him of the danger, but he will not be put off; he wants actively to help his sick mother. At the hardest part of the journey, the boy collapses and can go no further. The students try to carry him across the pass but it is impossible to do the crossing thus laden. They know they must leave him behind to die or else many more will die for lack of the medicine. The teacher insists that the boy must consent to his being left behind and inevitable death: he must use his reason rather than give into his all-too-human fear of death. After some thought the boy does consent to their going on without him, but asks to be thrown to a speedy death in the abyss rather than having to bear a slow death alone.

### Practical Work

**1. Having told the students the story, first of all ask them to debate the issues. Having accepted the boy on the mission, what alternatives did they have? Remind them that the boy is too sick to walk, so an answer is not to send one or even two of them to accompany him back to the village. Can they think of similar moral dilemmas?**

**2. Read the excerpt on the following page, which is the opening of the play. There are a number of practical suggestions after the extract for your class to work on. These are addressed directly to them.**

To help you check their findings, make sure that they have noticed:

The announcement of the message or moral at the beginning, which helps the audience know what they should be looking for.

The sung opening chorus, one of the forms of narration mentioned in Part One

The direct address of the audience in the teacher's speech

The stylised staging, divided into areas rather than realistic settings; only a chair is mentioned here - would it be there or would the mother bring it on?

stylised acting indicated in the calling from area to area and the listening at the non-existent door

the clarity of the language which has no frills or unnecessary detail, indicative of the clear no-nonsense acting style required to carry it off. This is particularly noticeable in the transitions shown in the mother's speech from 'I have heard that the journey is dangerous', through 'Will you take my child with you?', to her instant yielding when the teacher says no. No room is given for the working through of the emotions which would be necessary in a naturalistic performance.

## EXCERPT FROM 'HE WHO SAYS YES.'

THE GREAT CHORUS:

What we must learn above all is consent.

Many say yes, and yet there is no consent. Many are not asked, and many consent to wrong things. Therefore:

What we must learn above all is consent.

*The teacher in area 1, the mother and the young boy in area 2.*

THE TEACHER

I am the teacher. I keep a school in the city and I have a pupil whose father is dead; he has only his mother to look after him. Now I will go and say goodbye to them, for I shall soon be starting on a journey to the mountains. A terrible disease has broken out among us, and in the city beyond the mountains live several great doctors. *He knocks at the door.* May I come in?

THE BOY *enters area 1 from area 2*

Who is it? Oh, it's the teacher. The teacher has come to visit us!

THE TEACHER

Why have you not been to my school in the city for so long?

THE BOY

I have not been able to come because my mother has been ill.

THE TEACHER

I had no idea your mother too was ill. Please tell her at once that I am here.

THE BOY *calls to area 2*

Mother, the teacher is here.

THE MOTHER *sitting in area 2*

Ask him to come in.

THE BOY

Please come in.

*Both go to area 2*

THE TEACHER

It is a long time since I was here. Your son tells me you too have fallen ill. Are you better now?

THE MOTHER

No, I am not better. So far there is no known medicine for this disease.

THE TEACHER

We must find one. That is why I have come to say goodbye. Tomorrow I shall be starting on a journey across the mountains to get medicine and instruction. In the city beyond the mountains there are great doctors.

THE MOTHER

A relief expedition through the mountains! Yes, indeed, I have heard that great doctors live there, but I have also heard that the journey is dangerous. Will you take my child with you?

THE TEACHER

It is not a journey that a young child could make.

THE MOTHER

Well, I hope you return safely.

THE TEACHER

I must go now. Good-bye. *Goes to area 1.*

THE BOY *follows the teacher to area 1*

There is something I must say.

*The mother listens at the door.*

THE TEACHER

What have you got to say?

THE BOY

I want to go to the mountains with you.

**1. Having read the extract together, which is the opening of the play, notice clues about performance style and acting techniques. Make a list of them. What about the style is different from naturalism?**

**2. Suggest a way of staging this that includes room for the chorus and the areas indicated.**

**Later, without changing the set, the same areas have to indicate different heights of the mountain which they climb, and a difficult narrow pass, which the students try to carry the Boy across, and fail. Can you include in your design suggestions as to how to achieve these too?**

**3. In threes where possible, try out the short section from:  
the Mother: 'A relief expedition ...' to the end of this extract.**

**a] Improvise it, noticing what you feel you want to add to explain the emotional changes the characters are going through, e.g. the Mother, struggling from hope that she might be saved, through fear for her son's life, to acceptance, perhaps relief, that the teacher refuses, back to hope mixed with fear.**

**b] All the above muddle is the naturalistic approach. How can this gamut of emotions - and all three go through a quick range of contrasting feelings - be shown without muddying the clarity? Will it be through some quick gestic freeze-frames? See if you can come up with something that works and is consistent with the style of the piece.**

**4. Tell the rest of the story with narrative and mimed action, interspersed with freeze-framed tableaux to emphasise important moments.**

**5. In what ways is this piece teaching the actors as well as the audience? How successful do you find this as an idea?**

## WORK ON 'THE MEASURES TAKEN'

### EXCERPTS FROM 'THE MEASURES TAKEN.'

A study of 'The Measures Taken' is the best way I know of learning the epic theatre acting style through participation. It is impossible not to act in a Brechtian way, because the acting style is written into the script. The study of three representative scenes will show what I mean.

The play was written as a teaching piece for factory workers. Here is the opening:

THE CONTROL CHORUS

Step forward! Your work has been successful. The revolution marches forward even in that country.

The ranks of fighters are well organised even there. We agree with the measures taken.

THE FOUR AGITATORS

Wait, we must tell you something! We must advise you of the death of a comrade.

THE CONTROL CHORUS

Who killed him?

THE FOUR AGITATORS

We killed him. We shot him and cast him into a lime-pit.

THE CONTROL CHORUS

What had he done that caused you to shoot him?

THE FOUR AGITATORS

Most often he acted with us, occasionally against us, but finally he endangered the movement. He

wanted to act with us and acted against us. We demand your verdict.

THE CONTROL CHORUS

Describe how it happened and why, and you will hear our verdict.

THE FOUR AGITATORS

We will submit to your verdict.

The whole play is then a 'repetition of past events', taking away all element of surprise or feeling that events are happening in the here and now. We know from the beginning what the end will be: the death of the young comrade, and we know that whatever occurred, the death happened for rational and not emotional reasons. We as an audience are thus encouraged to search for the reasons for the death rather than being horrified when it happens in front of us.

Because the Young Comrade, as he is called from now on, is an emotional part, Brecht instructs that the four actors who play the part of the Four Agitators should take turns playing it. That is because Brecht wants each actor to experience playing emotion, but not for long enough to be in danger of being swept away by it. The cast list at the beginning states The Four Agitators, who play the parts of: The Young Comrade, the Head of the Party House, the Overseer, Two Coolies, Two Textile Factory Workers, The Policeman, The Merchant.' Such a multiplicity of parts divided amongst just four actors is one Verfremdungseffekt technique on its own. We have already explored the swapping of roles and how this helps guard against emotional involvement.

The agitators meet the Young Comrade and ask him to lead them to Mukden, where they are to work secretly to educate the workers there. The workers will then be in a position to begin their own revolution.

This is a part of Scene 2 which is called 'The Effacement.'

## THE FOUR AGITATORS

But the work in Mukden was illegal. And so before we crossed the border we had to efface our personal features. Our young comrade agreed with this. We repeat the proceedings.

*One of the agitators represents the head of the Party*

*House.* THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE

I am the head of the Party House. I agree that this comrade from my station should accompany you as your leader. Yet there is discontent in the factories of Mukden. The eyes of the world are turned on us today in this city, to see if one of us emerges from the hut of a Chinese worker. I have heard that gunboats are ready on the rivers, and armoured trains on the railway embankments. They will attack at the moment any of us are seen there. I therefore ask our comrades to cross the border as Chinese. *To the agitators.* You must not be seen.

THE TWO AGITATORS

We will not be seen.

THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE

Should one of you be injured, he must not be found.

THE TWO AGITATORS

He will not be found.

THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE

Then you are prepared to die and to conceal the dead?

THE TWO AGITATORS

Yes.

THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE

Then be yourselves no longer: you no longer Karl Schmidt from Berlin; you no longer Anna Kjersk from Kazan; and you no longer Peter Sawitsch from Moscow. You are nameless and without a past, empty pages on which the revolution may write its instructions.

THE TWO AGITATORS

Yes.

THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE *gives them masks which they put on....*

The title which would be displayed at the beginning of the scene, 'The Effacement' tells us what is going to happen. Extra power is added by the fact that the revolutionaries are prepared to literally efface themselves, submit their personalities and their history to serve Communism. The donning of the masks becomes a symbolic act as well as introducing another *Verfremdungseffekt* technique, often used by Brecht. Masks always make a character look, literally, 'strange.' We look at their actions and watch their behaviour in a different way. Masks are an excellent way of changing an audience's perception towards people. Practically, too, masks allow four people to take on a number of parts more easily and with the minimum of confusion. If a different person is taking the part of the Young Comrade all the time, having a recognisable mask for that character helps clarify this for an audience.

Just in case we are unaware of the dangers these agitators are going into, this little extract spells out their peril as well as pointing out how unimportant they are as individuals [emphasised by their effacement behind masks] compared to the greater importance of the revolution which will help millions improve their lives.

A number of scenes follow in which we see how the Young Comrade is always distracted by individual suffering which he wants to alleviate there and then: coolies with inadequate shoes to pull the rice barges; factory workers with inadequate wages. Always the Young Comrade - acted, you remember, by a different actor each time - becomes passionate and angry on the behalf of the oppressed and stirs them up to rebel before they have adequate means to do so. The message is that revolution needs to be slowly worked for to be successful. The Young Comrade's heart is in the right place but he cannot see the larger picture and in fact causes more problems instead of helping the workers, since he puts himself

and his comrades, with their good careful preparatory work, in danger of discovery by the authorities and a clamp-down that may prevent the advent of the revolution for many years to come. The three agitators warn the Young Comrade:

Yours is the impetuous revolution that will last a day  
And be throttled tomorrow.  
But our revolution begins tomorrow.  
It will conquer and change the world.  
Your revolution will end when you end.  
But when you have come to your end  
Our revolution will continue.

Despite many warnings and many obvious mistakes where he puts them all in danger, the play builds to its climax, the clash between reason and emotion, as the Young Comrade decides to put in his lot with the oppressed workers, take to the streets with them and actively fight at their side, a stance which would be doomed to failure as the workers are insufficiently prepared in every way. It is imperative that the angry young man, who has allowed emotion to obstruct his reason, be stopped:

#### THE YOUNG COMRADE

I can't submit, because I know I'm right. I can see with my two eyes that misery cannot wait.

#### THE CONTROL CHORUS

The individual has only two eyes  
The Party has a thousand eyes.  
The Party can see seven lands  
The individual a single city.  
The individual has only his hour  
The Party has many hours.  
The individual can be annihilated  
But the Party cannot be annihilated  
For it is the vanguard of the masses  
And it lays out its battles  
According to the methods of our classics, which are derived from  
The recognition of reality.

#### THE YOUNG COMRADE

That means nothing now. Now, in the face of battle, I reject all that was meaningful even yesterday; I denounce all agreements I have made; my actions will be totally human. The battle is here. I place myself at its head. I sympathise with the revolution.

#### THE THREE AGITATORS

Silence!

#### THE YOUNG COMRADE

I see oppression. I'm for the cause of freedom!

#### THE THREE AGITATORS

Silence! You'll betray us!

#### THE YOUNG COMRADE

I can't keep silent because I'm right.

### THE THREE AGITATORS

Right or not - if you speak, we're lost! Silence!

### THE YOUNG COMRADE

I have seen too much.

Therefore I will stand before them

As no one but myself, and tell them the truth.

*He takes off his mask and cries out*

We have come to help you. We have come from Moscow.

*He tears the mask to bits.*

### THE FOUR AGITATORS

And we watched him, and in the twilight We saw his naked face Human, innocent, and without guile. He had Torn the mask to bits.....

Their cover blown by the action of the Young Comrade, the Agitators knock him out, pick him up and run for their lives. After a time, the authorities are gaining on them and they debate what they are to do. They explore every possibility open to them but at last:

### THE FOUR AGITATORS

We decided:

That he must disappear, completely.

Since we can neither take him with us or leave him behind

We are compelled to shoot him and to cast him into the limepit where the Lime will burn him up.

### THE CONTROL CHORUS

You found no way out?

### THE FOUR AGITATORS

Pressed for time, we found no way out.

Just as animals help their own kind

We also wished to help him who

Fought with us for our cause.

For five minutes, in the face of our persecutors

We deliberated in hope of finding a

Better possibility.

Now it's your turn to deliberate

And find a better course of action.

Pause.

And so we decided: we now

Had to cut off a member of our own body.

***IT IS A TERRIBLE THING TO KILL***

We would not only kill others, but ourselves as well, if the need arose.

For violence is the only means whereby this deadly

World may be changed, as

Every living being knows.

And yet, we said

We are not permitted not to kill. At one with the Inflexible will to change the world, we formulated

The measures taken.

### THE CONTROL CHORUS

Continue your story. We

Sympathise with you.

It was not easy to do what was right.

It was not you who sentenced him, but

Reality.

THE FOUR AGITATORS

We repeat our final discussion.

THE FIRST AGITATOR

We want to ask him whether he agrees with us, because he was a courageous fighter.....

THE SECOND AGITATOR

But even if he does not agree with us, he must disappear, completely.

THE FIRST AGITATOR to *the young comrade*

If you are caught you will be shot; and since you will be recognised, our work will have been betrayed. Therefore we must be the ones to shoot you and cast you into the lime-pit, so that the lime will burn away all traces of you. And yet we ask you: Do you know any way out?

THE YOUNG COMRADE

No.

THE THREE AGITATORS

And we ask you: Do you agree with us?

*Pause.*

THE YOUNG COMRADE

Yes.

THE THREE AGITATORS

We also ask you: What shall we do with your body?

THE YOUNG COMRADE

You must cast me into the lime-pit, he said.

THE THREE AGITATORS

We asked: Do you want to do it alone?

THE YOUNG COMRADE

Help me.

THE THREE AGITATORS

Rest your head on our arm.

Close your eyes.

THE YOUNG COMRADE *unseen*

And he said: In the interests of Communism

In agreement with the progress of the proletarian masses

Of all lands

Consenting to the revolutionising of the world.

THE THREE AGITATORS

Then we shot him and

Cast him down into the lime-pit

And when the lime had swallowed him up

We turned back to our work.

THE CONTROL CHORUS

And your work was successful

You have propagated

The teachings of the Classics

The ABC of Communism

Instructions to the ignorant concerning their condition

Class-consciousness to the oppressed

And to the class-conscious, practical knowledge of the revolution.

And the revolution marches on there, too

And there, too, the ranks of fighters are well organised.

We agree with you.

And yet your report shows us what is

Needed to change the world:

Anger and tenacity, knowledge and indignation

Swift action, utmost deliberation

Cold endurance, unending perseverance

Comprehension of the individual and comprehension of the whole:

Taught only by reality can

Reality be changed.



This ends the play. I have put the whole of the last scene in because of the number of epic theatre and Verfremdungseffekt devices that are an intrinsic part of it. See how many you spot yourselves before looking at the checklist below.

1. After the emotional scene just before, where the Young Comrade asserts his humanity and tears up the mask, the emotion is abruptly cut off by the actor who plays the Young Comrade dropping his character and becoming the fourth Agitator again, with cool judgements on the Young Comrade's actions.
2. At moments of potentially highest emotion, the language changes to the narrative form: 'You must cast me into the lime-pit, he said.'
3. We are often reminded that the actors are taking on roles and repeating events that occurred some time ago: 'Continue your story...', 'We repeat our final discussion ...'
4. The audience is invited by direct appeal to join the debate: 'Now it's your turn to deliberate...'
5. The emotion of the actual death is reduced by the invisibility of the Young Comrade at that moment, and the fact that his speech is so cold and couched in the words of Communist jargon, like a manual.
6. We are not allowed to dwell on the killing because we are briskly reminded of its necessity by the Control Chorus, who sing triumphantly of the success - and consequent justification - of their mission.

## Practical Work

**1. Invent a scene in which the Young Comrade is diverted from the task of education and propaganda by the emotional plight of a poor person. An example might be, helping a working mother with a sick starving child, the Young Comrade diverts some of the precious funds put aside for the education programme. This programme would mean hundreds of thousands would benefit, by teaching them how to plan and work from within their society. The larger picture needs to be made clear to the audience, and the fact that the Young Comrade is incapable of understanding it.**

**Give the scene a title which will help point the audience to where they should be looking.**

**Use freeze-frames at key moments, so that you can check that the message is clearly coming over. Are the attitudes to each of the characters correctly pointed?**

**Allow the Young Comrade his emotional outburst but find ways of puncturing or balancing it.**

**Find a way of making reason more attractive than emotion. Does Brecht succeed in doing this himself?**

**2. Improvise the events of this last scene in your own words, without any of the Brechtian devices. What is the effect of this?**

**Repeat this but with the addition of wearing masks. The cheap blank white face masks you can get at any party or joke shop, cut off under the nose, are perfect for this. How does this change the effect of the scene?**

**Now, still using your own words and the masks, employ the devices of third person and past tense, as explored in the section on Verfremdungseffekt in Part One.**

This last task should have been particularly helpful in gradually detaching yourself from emotion, step by step, as you apply the techniques of Verfremdungseffekt.

## TRANSITION: A NOTE ON 'THE MOTHER.'

Though written in the same period as 'He Who Says Yes' and 'The Measures Taken', 'The Mother' begins to show glimmers of the mellower Brecht of the later plays. As a play it is far more realised and its central character has real personality and interest.

The subject is still didactic and can be summed up as the story of a working-class woman, ordinary and uneducated, who is drawn by circumstances into the revolutionary movement. Her son is very involved and at first the mother, Pelagea Vlasova, is hostile, frightened for her son, Pavel's safety. But after he is arrested, she finds herself becoming involved anyway, teaches herself to read, educates herself in Communist Party theory until she becomes, unlikely a heroine as she might seem, one of the most avid workers for the overthrow of the old unjust social system. Despite the political content, the character of Vlasova is warm and coloured with a wry ironic humour that makes her appealing. Brecht was beginning to realise that his message travels better via humour and an interesting, more sympathetic character.

Does this sound a contradiction? Are audiences in danger of being drawn to the character of the mother and thus putting their reasoning capacity on hold? Let's see how Brecht avoids this danger.

Brecht makes the Mother an appealing character. She is very much the centre of the play and we are drawn by her humour, her practicality, her common-sense and the strength of her spirit. She becomes a model for an audience to follow: if a woman like that can learn about the revolution and fight for it, then anyone can, is the message, loud and clear. Her development, from the 'whining' of the beginning where she tells us it is enough of a battle just to make her paltry few kopecks stretch to the food and necessities for life, to the woman who has lost her son and grown old in the service of the revolution, has to be appealing. She has got to be a shining example, but an example that appeals to our reason and not our emotion. Couched in her no-nonsense language, lightened by her humour, the lessons of Marxism are a much easier pill for audiences to swallow. It is a masterly stroke on the part of Brecht: through this play the lessons of the revolution, the education of the working classes seem real and achievable.

So that we can focus on the messages and the model that Pelagea Vlasova offers, Brecht avoids direct confrontation with emotion. The death of her son Pavel is mentioned in the caption that begins a scene:

"Attempting to cross the Finnish border, Pavel Vlasov is arrested and shot." The scene opens with the Mother holding a letter in her hand, presumably giving her the news. Instead of dwelling on her sorrow, the Chorus sings to her of her son's final moments and the thoughts that went through his head. The message of the song is that, to make Pavel's sacrifice worth something, there has to be more education of more workers, so that the Revolution will come about and there will be no need to shoot people like Pavel. The Mother must fight on or it was all for nothing. And she does.

Songs, captions, scenes that range over many years and many locations, a practical heroine, messages clearly put over for a thinking audience who are never patronised, 'The Mother' gives Brecht a successful pattern for epic theatre and the great plays he wrote during the late 1930s and 1940s.

## WORK ON 'THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE'

In the last plays we find Brecht mellowed. The strict rules he applies to actors and audience in 'The Measures Taken' and the other didactic pieces are more relaxed. Minor characters may still be swapped - a large cast will be undertaken by a small number of actors - but the main characters remain played by a single actor and there are emotional highs and lows, such as the death of Kattrin in 'Mother Courage' and the winning of the child by Grusha in 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle.' The world is looked at more kindly. Yes, there are still things wrong with it, but he does allow some good characters to emerge. In the days of writing 'Baal' all females were fallen women or prostitutes. Now he allows goodness, kindness and virtue in the characters of Grusha, Kattrin and Shen Te in 'The Good Person of Setzuan.' Most of all, he allows 'spass' or fun, in his plays, something singularly missing from his didactic period! Now we find him saying that, as well as instruction, a play must also entertain and that an audience is even better instructed through the use of humour.

His central concerns are the same. The world still needs changing and most of the features of epic drama are still firmly in place, though some are now used more as rehearsal techniques - for example, role-swapping and speaking in the third person - in order to help an actor remain detached from his role during the lead-up to performance.

In 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle', probably his best-loved play, the central theme is [quoted from the play itself] :

That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it, thus  
 The children to the maternal, that they thrive;  
 The carriages to good drivers, that they are driven well;  
 And the valley to the waterers, that it shall bear fruit."

The structure of the play is a play-within-a-play, thus keeping to the 'epic' idea of narration and demonstration. After a war, all pieces of land are being redistributed to those who would use them best. The ownership of a valley is in dispute: the original valley-dwellers want it because it's their home, i.e. for sentimental *emotional* reasons - but another group of people want it to plant out as orchards so as to benefit a great number of people with the produce - a useful and *reasonable* solution. A famous singer settles the dispute by narrating the story of the Chalk Circle, which is then acted out.

In a far-off land there is a revolution. In her panic to leave her palace before the rebels can catch her, the Governor's Wife forgets her own baby, now the heir to the rulership since his father has been killed by the rebels. Grusha, a palace servant-girl, picks the baby up and looks after him, despite the fact she's putting herself in great danger, since the rebels want to kill the child so as to wipe out the ruling line. Grusha travels through many dangers, pretending the child is hers when questioned.

Some years later there is a counter-revolution.' The rebels are beaten and the original ruling family are back in power. Now the Governor's wife wants to track down her lost son in order to lay claim, through him, to his inheritance. The boy is found and brought back to the city. Since Grusha swears still that he is her child, a judge is appointed to decide to whom the boy belongs. He gives the judgement of the chalk circle. The child is placed in the circle. Both 'mothers' are told to take a hand and pull. Whoever pulls him out of the circle wins him, or so both women assume. Twice the Governor's Wife wins because Grusha cannot bear to risk hurting the boy. The

judge rules that Grusha is the real mother because she is 'good for the child.' The child is a metaphor for the valley of the opening scene, so by this device that argument is settled too. Just because someone is the natural mother doesn't make her necessarily the best mother for the child; and just because the original valley-dwellers have always lived there it doesn't follow that they would necessarily use it in the best way.

Brecht invites us to look at the law and the accepted traditions of society and to question them. Don't accept things as they are, he is saying; society needs changing if in real life the best possible outcome would not have happened. And it wouldn't. In real life, the real mother would have been awarded the child and the owners of the valley would have kept their land, it is time to reassess, says Brecht, all that we take for granted and look at it afresh. In other words, we must apply *Verfremdungseffekt* to every situation, so that we may re-examine it in a rational way.

'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' has been called "the outstanding example of the technique of 'epic' drama." [ Raymond Williams] The use of narration, much of it sung, the demonstration of the story by actors taking on the characters in front of us, the story itself which spans many years and different locations are all by now familiar epic devices. In addition, the original production used other devices which have become famous as elements of epic performance:

1. The white half-curtain. This was flown down from the flies and concealed the top half of the stage only, breaking up each scene. Scene-changing was not concealed by it, thus reminding the audience they were in a theatre and that this was only a play they were watching. Projections were shone onto the curtain telling the audience the main outline of the scene to come, thus also taking away surprise and keeping the audience's reasoning faculties on alert.

2. I have already mentioned the gest of the 'evil' characters, the aristocrats such as the Governor's Wife, who wore white half-masks with supercilious expressions and white gloves on their hands, which they held in the air to emphasise their uselessness.

3. Third person speaking is by now mainly a rehearsal technique, but it occasionally spills into emotional scenes, in order to put that emotion at one remove. For instance, in the first courtship scene between Grusha and Simon, her soldier lover, this happens: "Is the young lady impatient? Does she want cherries in Winter?"

Hopefully you will have time to study the whole play with the students but in case you haven't, I have given enough detail in the above to give an overview which, together with the practical work below, will serve.

## TWO EXTRACTS FOR STUDY THROUGH PRACTICE FROM 'THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE'

from SCENE 3.

CHARACTERS: The Singer and musicians; Grusha; The Peasant Woman; The Peasant; The Corporal; Another Ironshirt.

THE SINGER

When Grusha Vachnadze came to the River Sirra  
The flight grew too much for her, the helpless child too heavy.

THE MUSICIANS

The rosy dawn in the cornfields  
Is nothing but cold to the sleepless.  
The gay clatter of the milk cans in the farmyard  
Where the smoke rises is nothing but a threat to the fugitives.  
She who drags the child feels nothing but its weight.

*Grusha stops in front of a farm.*

GRUSHA

Now you've wetted yourself again, and you know I've no nappies. Michael, we've got to part. This is far enough from the city. They won't want you so badly, little squit, that they'll follow you all this way. The woman looks kind, and just you smell the milk! So farewell, little Michael. I'll forget how you kicked me in the back all night to make me go faster. And you - you forget the meagre fare. It was meant well. I'd love to have kept you, because your nose is so small, but it can't be done. I'd have shown you your first rabbit and - how not to wet yourself, but I must turn back, because my sweetheart the soldier might soon return, and suppose he didn't find me? You can't ask that of me, Michael.

*A fat Peasant Woman carries a milk can to the door. Grusha waits until she has gone in, then gingerly approaches the house. She tiptoes to the door and lays the child on the threshold. Then, hiding behind a tree, she waits until the peasant woman opens the door and sees the bundle.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Jesus Christ, what's this? Husband!

THE PEASANT

What's up? Let me have my soup.

THE PEASANT WOMAN *to the child*

Where's your mother? Haven't you got one? It's a boy. And the linen is fine; it's from a good family. And they just leave him on our doorstep. Oh, what times we live in!

THE PEASANT

If they think we're going to feed it, they're mistaken. You take it to the priest in the village. That's all we can do.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

What will the priest do with it? It needs a mother. There, it's waking up. Don't you think we could keep it?

THE PEASANT *shouting*

No!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

I could lay it in the corner, next to the armchair. I only need a crib for it. And I can take it into the fields with me. Look how it's smiling! Husband, we have a roof over our heads and we can do it. I won't hear another word.

*She carries the child into the house. The Peasant follows, protesting. Grusha steps out from behind the tree, laughs, and hurries away in the opposite direction.*

THE SINGER

Why so gay, you, making for home?

THE MUSICIANS Because with a smile the child

Has won new parents for himself, that's why I'm gay.

Because I am rid of the loved one

That's why I'm happy.

THE SINGER

And why are you sad?

THE MUSICIANS

I'm sad because I'm single and I'm free

Of the little burden in whom a heart was beating:

Like one robbed, like one impoverished I'm going.

*Grusha walks for a short while, then meets the two Ironshirts, who hold her up at the point of a lance.*

THE CORPORAL

Young lady, you're running into the Armed Forces. Where are you coming from? When are you coming? Are you entertaining illegal relations with the enemy? Where is he hiding? What sort of movements is he making in your rear? What about the hills? What about the valley? How are your stockings fastened?

*Grusha stands there frightened.*

GRUSHA

They are strongly fastened; you'd better withdraw.

THE CORPORAL

I always withdraw. In that respect I'm reliable. Why are you staring like that at the lance? In the field a soldier never loses control of his lance. That's an order. Learn it by heart, blockhead. Now then, young lady, where are you off to?

GRUSHA

To my intended, one Simon Chachava, of the palace guard in Nukha. Wait till I write to him; he'll break your bones for you.

THE CORPORAL

Simon Chachava? Indeed! I know him. He gave me the key, so I could keep an eye on you once in a while. Blockhead, we're getting unpopular. We must make her realise we have honourable intentions. Young lady, my apparent flippancy hides a serious nature. So I'll tell you officially: I want a child from you. *Grusha utters a little scream.* Blockhead, she has understood. Ooh, isn't that a sweet fright! 'But first I must take the bread out of the oven, Officer! But first I must change my torn chemise, Colonel!' But joking apart. Listen, young lady, we are looking for a certain child in these parts. Have you heard of a child from the city, of good family, dressed in fine linen?

GRUSHA

No, I've heard nothing.

THE SINGER

Run, kind heart! The killers are coming! Keep the helpless child, helpless girl! And so she runs.

*Suddenly, panic-stricken, she turns round and runs. The Ironshirts glance at each other, then follow her, cursing.*

THE MUSICIANS

In the bloodiest times

There are still good people.

*As Grusha enters the cottage, the peasant woman is bending over the child's crib.*

GRUSHA

Hide it! Quick! The Ironshirts are coming! It was I who laid it on your doorstep. But it isn't mine. It's of a noble family.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Who's coming? What sort of

Ironshirts? GRUSHA

Don't ask questions. The Ironshirts who are looking for it.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

They've no business in my house. But it seems I must have a word with you.

GRUSHA

Take off that fine linen. That will give us away.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Oh, you and your linen! In this house /decide. And don't you mess up my room. But why did you abandon it? That's a sin.

GRUSHA *looking out of the window*

There, they're coming from behind the trees. I shouldn't have run away. That gave them ideas.

What on earth shall I do?

THE PEASANT WOMAN *looking out of the window and suddenly starting with fear*

Jesus and Mary! Ironshirts!

GRUSHA

They're after the child!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

But suppose they come in?

GRUSHA

You mustn't give it to them. Say it's yours.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Yes

GRUSHA

They'll run it through if you let them have it.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

But suppose they demand it? The money for the harvest is in the house.

GRUSHA

If you let them have it, they'll run it through, here in your room! You've got to say it's yours.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Yes, but suppose they don't believe me?

GRUSHA

You must speak firmly.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

They'll burn the roof over our head.

GRUSHA

That's why you've got to say it's yours. His name's Michael. I shouldn't have told you that.

*The peasant woman nods.* Don't nod like that. And don't tremble; they'll notice.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Yes

GRUSHA

Stop saying yes. I can't stand it any longer. *She shakes her.* Haven't you got a child?

THE PEASANT WOMAN *muttering*

In the war.

GRUSHA

Then perhaps he's an Ironshirt, too, by now? And what if he ran children through? You'd give him a fine piece of your mind! 'Stop waving that lance in my room! Is that what I've reared you for? Go and wash your neck before you speak to your mother.'

THE PEASANT WOMAN

That's true, I wouldn't let him behave like that.

GRUSHA

Promise me you'll say it's yours.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Yes

GRUSHA

There! They're coming!

*There is a knocking at the door. The women don't answer. Enter the Iron shirts. The peasant woman bows deeply.*

THE CORPORAL

Well, there she is. What did I tell you? My nose. I smelled her. Young lady, I have a question to ask you: Why did you run away? What did you think I would do to you? I'll bet it was something lewd. Confess!

GRUSHA *while the peasant woman continues to bow*

I'd left the milk on the stove. Then I suddenly remembered it.

THE CORPORAL

I thought it was because you imagined I'd looked at you in a lewd way - as if I were thinking there could be something between us. A lustful glance, know what I mean?



GRUSHA

I didn't see that.

THE CORPORAL

But it could have been, eh? You must admit that. After all, I could be a swine. I'm quite frank with you: I could think of all sorts of things if we were alone. *To the peasant woman* Haven't you got something to do in the yard? The chickens to feed?

THE PEASANT WOMAN *falling suddenly to her knees*

Soldier, I didn't know anything about it. Please don't set my house on fire.

THE CORPORAL

What are you talking about?

THE PEASANT WOMAN

I have nothing to do with it. She left it on the doorstep, I swear.

THE CORPORAL *suddenly sees the child and whistles*

Ah, there's a little one in the crib! Blockhead, I smell a thousand piastres. Take the old girl out and hold on to her. It looks as though I'll have to do some cross-examining. *The peasant woman lets herself be led out by the soldier, without a word. Well, there's the child I wanted to have from you. He walks towards the crib.*

GRUSHA

Officer, it's mine. It's not the one you're after.

THE CORPORAL

I'll just have a look at it. *He bends over the crib. Grusha looks round in despair.*

GRUSHA

It's mine! it's mine!

THE CORPORAL

Nice linen!

*Grusha jumps at him to pull him away. He throws her off and again bends over the crib. Looking round in despair, she suddenly sees a big log of wood, seizes it in panic, and hits the Corporal over the head from behind. She quickly picks up the child and dashes off.*

THE SINGER

After her escape from the Ironshirts

After twenty-two days of wandering

At the foot of the Janga-Tau glacier

From this moment Grusha Vachnadze decided to be the child's mother.

THE MUSICIANS

The helpless girl

Became the mother of the helpless child.

*Grusha squats over a half-frozen stream to ladle some water in her hand for the child.*

GRUSHA

Nobody wants to take you

So I shall have to take you

There is no one else but me, my dear

On this black day in a meagre year

Who will not forsake you.

Since I've carried you too long

And with sore feet

Since the milk was too dear

I grew fond of you.

[I wouldn't be without you any more.]

I'll throw your fine little shirt away

And wrap you in rags

I'll wash you and christen you

With glacier water.

[You'll have to bear it.]

*She has taken off the child's fine linen and wrapped it in a rag.*

## Practical Work

**1. Look carefully at the characters in this extract; if possible divide your class into groups and allocate a character to each person. The characters are listed above the extract. Ignore the Singer and musicians, who are just narrators here.**

**Through group discussion and based on the evidence of the extract, write a list of descriptive words and phrases that can be applied to your character.**

**Next, decide on the most important one of these words for this particular scene; decide on one for each character, e.g. the Peasant Woman could be 'frightened.' She is a lot of other things, but this could be the most essential descriptive word for this scene.**

**2. Decide on the main message of this scene. It could be that you decide the main message is that Grusha decides to take on full responsibility for the child. This scene is a kind of turning point. She tries to dispose of the child, finds she can't and accepts her lot is tied up with the baby.**

**Now try to word this message in a way that would point out to an audience what attitude they should take to the scene. Perhaps the Singer's words: "Grusha Vachnadze decided to be the child's mother," is close enough. What do you think? Or is the 'gest' of the scene something more like 'Grusha learns to accept the responsibility of caring for a helpless human being?' The wording is important and what Brechtian actors spent a long time on before acting the scene. The gest has to be mutually decided before any characterisation work can be done, because each person's individual gest will depend on it.**

**3. Dependent on the gest for the whole scene, decide now on the gest you will have for your own character. You will need to take into account the key-words you chose for the first stage of this exercise. For example, even if the key-word for the Peasant Woman is 'frightened', there may be a more important 'point' to the character which depends on the main gest of the scene. Your attitude to your character may now be to exaggerate the sentimental silly 'mothering' the Peasant Woman gives to the baby when she finds it, to contrast with the practical approach Grusha has to the child plus the real deep affection she clearly shows him.**

**4. Using exaggeration in order to clarify a gest through contrast is very important. Try some pair work to help understand this. Contrast: Grusha holding and changing the baby's clothes at the end of**

**the extract, during her song, with the Peasant Woman finding the baby on her doorstep**

**The Corporal and the Ironshirt: can you find ways of making the Ironshirt's body language - since he doesn't speak -  
a) tell us that all soldiers are like this, crude, cruel,**

**unfeeling etc.**

**b] tell us that the Corporal is a one-off nasty piece of work whose 'rank' has gone to his head.**

**5. Try some individual still pictures, to explore clear gestic body language:**

**Divide up Grusha's first long speech - 'Now you've wetted yourself ...' finding key points to emphasise by 'freezing' the body language and facial expression.**

**Try the same with the Corporal's speech: 'Simon Chachava? Indeed! ...'**

**6. Try some pair sections in the same way. Concentrate on finding the right voice tones to convey the gest, as well as the body language. Freeze any key moments you want your audience to notice particularly. Be prepared to justify your choices. Use:**

**The section with the Peasant and the Peasant Woman;**

**The dialogue between Grusha and the Peasant Woman.**

**7. Finishing off with a dramatisation of this extract should be relatively easy if you have done this kind of groundwork on the scene. If you have time, try the whole scene out.**

## EXTRACT TWO

From Scene 6, the trial of the chalk circle. Azdak is the judge.

**CHARACTERS:** The Governor's Wife The First Lawyer; The Second Lawyer; Shalva, her Adjutant [unspeaking] - these make one grouping; Grusha; Simon, formerly engaged to Grusha; The Cook, who used to work with Grusha and who witnessed the Governor's Wife's desertion of her baby. These make the second grouping.

Azdak, the judge; Shauva, a policeman, acting as a Court official.

Michael, the disputed child.

An Old Man and an Old Woman.

The Singer.

### **THE FIRST LAWYER**

High Court of Justice! Of all bonds the bonds of blood are the strongest. Mother and child - is there a more intimate relationship? Can one tear a child from its mother? High Court of Justice! She has conceived it in the holy ecstasies of love. She has carried it in her womb. She has fed it with her blood. She has borne it with pain. High Court of Justice! It has been observed, Your Worship, how even the wild tigress, robbed of her young, roams restless through the mountains, reduced to a shadow. Nature herself...

*AZDAK interrupting, to Grusha*

What's your answer to all this and anything else the lawyer might have to say?

**GRUSHA**

He's mine.

**AZDAK**

Is that all? I hope you can prove it. In any case, I advise you to tell me why you think the child should be given to you.

GRUSHA

I've brought him up 'according to my best knowledge and conscience.' I always found him something to eat. Most of the time he had a roof over his head. And I went to all sorts of trouble for him. I had expenses too. I didn't think of my own comfort. I brought up the child to be friendly with everyone. And from the beginning I taught him to work as well as he could. But he's still very small.

THE FIRST LAWYER

Your Worship, it is significant that the person herself doesn't claim any bond of blood between herself and this child.

AZDAK

The Court takes note.

THE FIRST LAWYER

Thankyou, your Worship. Please permit a woman who has suffered much - who has already lost her husband and now also has to fear the loss of her child - to address a few words to you. Her Highness, Natella Abashvili...

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE *quietly*

A most cruel fate, sir, forces me to ask you to return my beloved child. It's not for me to describe to you the tortures of a bereaved mother's soul, the anxiety, the sleepless nights, the ...

THE SECOND LAWYER *exploding*

It's outrageous the way this woman is treated. She's not allowed to enter her husband's palace.

The revenue of her estates is blocked. She is told cold-bloodedly that it's tied to the heir. She can't do anything without the child. She can't even pay her lawyers. *To the first lawyer who, desperate about this outburst, makes frantic gestures to stop him speaking:* Dear Illo Shuboladze, why shouldn't it be divulged now that it's the Abashvili estates that are at stake?

THE FIRST LAWYER

Please, Honoured Sandro Obolodze! We had agreed ... *To Azdak:* Of course it is correct that the trial will also decide whether our noble client will obtain the right to dispose of the large Abashvili estates. I say 'also' on purpose, because in the foreground stands the human tragedy of a mother, as Natella Abashvili has rightly explained at the beginning of her moving statement. Even if Michael Abashvili were not the heir to the estates, he would still be the dearly beloved child of my client.

AZDAK

Stop! The Court is touched by the mention of the estates. It's a proof of human feeling.

THE SECOND LAWYER

Thanks, Your Worship. Dear Illo Shuboladze, in any case we can prove that the person who took possession of the child is not the child's mother. Permit me to lay before the Court the bare facts. By an unfortunate chain of circumstances, the child, Michael Abashvili, was left behind while his mother was making her escape. Grusha, the Palace kitchenmaid, was present on this Easter Sunday and was observed busying herself with the child ...

THE COOK

All her mistress was thinking about was what kind of dresses she would take along.

THE SECOND LAWYER *unmoved*

Almost a year later Grusha turned up in a mountain village with a child, and there entered into matrimony with ...

AZDAK

How did you get into that mountain village?

GRUSHA

On foot, Your Worship. And he was mine.

SIMON

I am the father, Your Worship.

THE COOK

I had him in my care for five piastres, Your Worship.

THE SECOND LAWYER

This man is engaged to Grusha, High Court of Justice, and for this reason his testimony is not reliable.

AZDAK

Are you the man she married in the mountain village?

SIMON

No, Your Worship, she married a peasant.

AZDAK *winking at Grusha*

Why? *Pointing at Simon.* Isn't he any good in bed? Tell the truth.

GRUSHA

We didn't get that far. I married because of the child, so that he should have a roof over his head.

*Pointing at Simon.* He was in the war, Your Worship.

AZDAK

And now he wants you again, eh?

SIMON

I want to state in evidence ...

GRUSHA *angrily*

I am no longer free, Your Worship.

AZDAK

And the child, you claim, is the result of whoring? *Grusha does not answer.* I'm going to ask you a question: What kind of child is it? Is it one of those ragged street-urchins? Or is it a child from a well-to-do family?

GRUSHA *angrily*

It's an ordinary child.

AZDAK

I mean, did he have fine features from the beginning?

GRUSHA

He had a nose in his face.

AZDAK

He had a nose in his face. I consider that answer of yours to be important. They say of me that once, before passing judgement, I went out and sniffed at a rosebush. Tricks of this kind are necessary nowadays. I'll cut things short now, and listen no longer to your lies. *To Grusha:* Especially yours. *To the group of defendants:* I can imagine what you've cooked up between you to cheat me. I know you. You're swindlers.

*\* A number of other people are waiting their turn in front of*

*the judge.*

GRUSHA *suddenly*

I can quite understand your wanting to cut it short, having seen what you received!

AZDAK

Shut up! Did I receive anything from you?

GRUSHA *while the Cook tries to restrain her*

Because I haven't got anything.

AZDAK

Quite true. I never get a thing from starvelings. I might just as well starve myself. You want justice, but do you want to pay for it? When you go to the butcher you know you have to pay. But to the Judge you go as though to a funeral supper.

SIMON *loudly*

'When the horse was shod, the horsefly stretched out its leg,' as the saying is.

AZDAK *eagerly accepting the challenge*

'Better a treasure in the sewer than a stone in the mountain stream.'

SIMON

'A fine day. Let's go fishing,' said the angler to the worm.'

AZDAK

'I'm my own master,' said the servant, and cut off his foot.'

SIMON

'I love you like a father,' said the Czar to the peasant, and had the Czarevitch's head chopped off.'

AZDAK

'The fool's worst enemy is himself.'

SIMON

But 'a fart has no nose.'

AZDAK

Fined ten piastres for indecent language in Court. That'll teach you what Justice is.

GRUSHA

That's a fine kind of Justice. You jump on us because we don't talk so refined as that lot with their lawyers.

AZDAK

Exactly. The likes of you are too stupid. It's only right that you should get it in the neck.

GRUSHA

Because you want to pass the child on to her. She who is too refined even to know how to change its nappies! You don't know any more about Justice than I do, that's clear.

AZDAK

There's something in that. I'm an ignorant man. I haven't even a decent pair of trousers under my robe. See for yourself. With me, everything goes on food and drink. I was educated in a convent school. Come to think of it, I'll fine you ten piastres too. For contempt of Court. What's more, you're a very silly girl to turn me against you, instead of making eyes at me and wagging your backside a bit to keep me in a good temper. Twenty piastres!

GRUSHA

Even if it were thirty, I'd tell you what I think of your justice, you drunken onion! How dare you talk to me as though you were the cracked Isaiah on the church window! When they pulled you out of your mother, it wasn't planned that you'd rap her over the knuckles for pinching a little bowl of corn from somewhere! Aren't you ashamed of yourself when you see how afraid I am of you? But you've let yourself become their servant. So that their houses are not taken away, because they've stolen them. Since when do houses belong to bed-bugs? But you're on the look-out, otherwise they couldn't drag our men into their wars. You bribe-taker! *Azduk gets up. He begins to beam. With a little hammer he knocks on the table half-heartedly as if to get silence. But as Grusha's scolding continues, he only beats time with it.* I've no respect for you. No more than for a thief or a murderer with a knife, who does what he wants. You can take the child away from me, a hundred against one, but I tell you one thing: for a profession like yours, they ought to choose only blood-suckers and men who rape children. As a punishment. To make them sit in judgement over their fellow-men, which is worse than swinging from the gallows.

*AZDAK sitting down*

Now it will be thirty! And I won't go on brawling with you as though we were in a tavern. What would happen to my dignity as a Judge? I've lost all interest in your case. Where's the couple who wanted a divorce? *To Shauva:* Bring them in. This case is adjourned for fifteen minutes.

THE FIRST LAWYER *to the Governor's Wife*

Without producing any more evidence, Madam, we have the verdict in the bag.

THE COOK *to Grusha*

You've gone and spoiled your chances with him. You won't get the child now.

*Enter a very old couple.*

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE

Shalva, my smelling salts!

AZDAK

I receive. *The old couple do not understand.* I hear you want to be divorced. How long have you been living together?

THE OLD WOMAN

Forty years, Your Worship.

AZDAK

And why d'you want a divorce?

THE OLD MAN

We don't like each other, Your Worship.

AZDAK

Since when?

THE OLD WOMAN

Oh, from the very beginning, Your Worship.

AZDAK

I'll consider your case and deliver my verdict when I'm finished with the other one. *Shauva leads them into the background.* I need the child. *He beckons Grusha towards him and bends not unkindly towards her.* I've noticed that you have a soft spot for justice. I don't believe he's your child, but if he were yours, woman, wouldn't you want him to be rich? You'd only have to say he isn't yours and at once he'd have a palace, scores of horses in his stable, scores of beggars on his doorstep, scores of soldiers in his service, and scores of petitioners in his courtyard. Now, what d'you say? Don't you want him to be rich?

*Grusha is silent.*

THE SINGER

Listen now to what the angry girl thought, but didn't

say: *He sings:*

He who wears the shoes of gold  
Tramples on the weak and old  
Does evil all day long  
And mocks at wrong.

O to carry as one's own  
Heavy is the heart of stone.  
The power to do ill  
Wears out the will.

Hunger he will dread  
Not those who go unfed:  
Fear the fall of night  
But not the light.

AZDAK

I think I understand you, woman.

GRUSHA

I won't give him away. I've brought him up, and he knows me.

*Enter Shauva with the child.*

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE

It's in rags!

GRUSHA

That's not true! I wasn't given the time to put on his good shirt.

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE

It's been in a pig-sty.

GRUSHA *furiously*

I'm no pig, but there are others who are. Where did you leave your child?

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE

I'll let you have it, you vulgar person. *She is about to throw herself on Grusha, but is restrained by her lawyers.* She's a criminal! She must be whipped!

THE SECOND LAWYER *holding his hand over her mouth*

Most gracious Natella Abishvili, you promised ... Your Worship, the plaintiff's nerves ...

AZDAK

Plaintiff and Defendant! The Court has listened to your case, and has come to no decision as to who the real mother of the child is. I as Judge have the duty of choosing a mother for the child. I'll make a test. Shauva, get a piece of chalk and draw a circle on the floor. *Shauva does so.* Now place the child in the centre. *Shauva puts Michael, who smiles at Grusha, in the centre of the circle.* Stand near the circle, both of you. *The Governor's Wife and Grusha step up to the circle.* Now each of you take the child by a hand. The true mother is she who has the strength to pull the child out of the circle, towards herself.

THE SECOND LAWYER *quickly*

High Court of Justice, I protest! I object that the fate of the great Abashvili estates, which are bound up with the child as the heir, should be made dependent on such a doubtful wrestling match. Moreover, my client does not command the same physical strength as this person, who is accustomed to physical work.

AZDAK

She looks pretty well-fed to me. Pull!

*The Governor's Wife pulls the child out of the circle to her side. Grusha has let it go and stands aghast.*

THE FIRST LAWYER *congratulating the Governor's Wife*

What did I say! The bonds of blood!

AZDAK *to Grusha*

What's the matter with you? You didn't pull!

GRUSHA

I didn't hold on to him. *She runs to Azdak.* Your Worship, I take back everything I said against you. I ask your forgiveness. If I could just keep him until he can speak properly. He knows only a

few words.

AZDAK

Don't influence the Court! I bet you know only twenty yourself. All right, I'll do the test once more, to make certain.

*The two women take up position again.*

AZDAK Pull!

*Again Grusha lets go of the child.*

GRUSHA *in despair*

I've brought him up! Am I to tear him to pieces? I can't do it!

AZDAK *rising*

And in this manner the Court has established the true mother. *To Grusha:* Take your child and be off with it. I advise you not to stay in town with him. *To the Governor's Wife:* And you disappear before I fine you for fraud. Your estates fall to the city. A playground for children will be made out of them. They need one, and I have decided it shall be called after me - The Garden of Azdak. *The Governor's Wife has fainted and is carried out by the Adjutant, Shalva. Her lawyers have preceded her. Grusha stands motionless. Shauva leads the child towards her.* Now I'll take off the Judge's robe - it has become too hot for me. I'm not cut out for a hero. But I invite you all to a little farewell dance, outside on the meadow. Oh, I had almost forgotten something in my excitement. I haven't signed the decree for divorce.

*Using the Judge's seat as a table, he writes something on a piece of paper and prepares to leave. Dance music has started.*

SHAUVA *having read what is on the paper.*

But that's not right. You haven't divorced the old couple. You've divorced Grusha from her husband.

AZDAK

Have I divorced the wrong ones? I'm sorry, but it'll have to stand. I never retract anything. If I did, there'd be no law and order. *To the Old Couple.* Instead, I invite you to my feast. You won't mind dancing with each other. *To Grusha and Simon.* I've still got 40 piastres coming from you.

SIMON *pulling out his purse*

That's cheap, Your Worship. And many thanks.

AZDAK *pocketing the money*

I'll need it.

GRUSHA

So we'd better leave town tonight, eh, Michael? *About to take the child on her back. To Simon:* You like him?

SIMON *taking the child on his back*

With my respects, I like him.

GRUSHA

And now I can tell you: I took him because on that Easter Sunday I got engaged to you. And so it is a child of love. Michael, let's dance.

*She dances with Michael. Simon dances with the Cook. The Old Couple dance with each other. Azdak stands lost in thought. The dancers soon hide him from view. Occasionally he is seen again, but less and less as more couples enter and join the dance.*

THE SINGER

And after this evening Azdak disappeared and was never seen again.

But the people of Grusinia did not forget him and often remembered

His time of Judgement as a brief

Golden Age that was almost just.

*The dancing couples dance out Azdak has disappeared.*

But you, who have listened to the story of the Chalk Circle

Take note of the meaning of the ancient song:

That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it, thus

The children to the maternal, that they thrive;

The carriages to good drivers, that they are driven well;

And the valley to the waterers, that it shall bear fruit.



## **PRACTICAL WORK**

**1. Apply the same approaches to beginning the work as you did with the last extract. That is:**

- a) Choose a character, read the extract carefully and apply whatever descriptive words seem to fit the character in this situation. Fix on one as the most important.**
- b) Decide on the message of the scene. Encapsulate this message in words that would tell an audience clearly what you want them to know.**
- c) Decide how your character contributes to this message. It could be directly or by contrast. Experiment with voice, gestures and facial expression to come up with some clear 'gests' for your character.**
- d) Choose two or three moments from the script to show a frozen statue of your character. Ask others in the group to check that the gest communicates clearly in each case.**

**Note: the most complex character in this scene is that of Azdak. As a group you may all want to contribute ideas about him. How should he be played? He cannot be too exaggerated because he is ultimately a 'good' character. The attitude the actor has to this character is very important to establish; it has to be ironic, I think; the actor is showing a rascal in action, a rogue who enjoys causing mayhem amongst those in any kind of authority, an anarchist in action, but subtly done so that the lawyers and so on suspect nothing.**

**2. Which characters would work best through exaggeration in this scene? Guard against caricaturing those that you want the audience to feel sympathy for. Note that 'feeling sympathy for' is not the same as being completely caught up in the character's emotional state. An audience should want Grusha to win the child, or the message hasn't communicated properly. The scene itself is written in such a way that it guards against total empathy with Grusha.**

**Work on the exaggerated characters through sections of the script. Work in pairs on each character and employ Brecht's ideas of role swapping: that is, take turns with the character and note how seeing another's ideas helps add to your own arsenal.**

**3. How does humour help this scene? Identify the types of humour used and work in pairs exploring the comic potential of:**

**the two lawyers**

**the Governor's Wife and her adjutant, Shalva - he doesn't speak but he's there -what is he doing?**

**the Old Man and the Old Woman**

**Explore the interchange between Azdak and Simon in which each is trying to outdo the other with apt proverbs. How would you communicate the sense of these to an audience? A clue: Simon's**

proverbs are all to do with trickery, things not being what they seem, until the last one which is a direct insult to Azdak. What, therefore, is he saying through them to Azdak? Azdak's proverbs are all to do with making the best of situations and being in charge of one's own destiny. What is he really saying?

4. Make large group tableaux which show clearly the gest of the moment and the gest of each character at that moment for the following lines - they are quoted in the order they occur in the extract:

The First Lawyer: Mother and child - is there a more intimate relationship?

The Second Lawyer: Dear Illo Shuboladze, why shouldn't it be divulged now that it's the Abashvili estates that are at stake?

Grusha: Even if it were thirty, I'd tell you what I think of your justice, you drunken onion!

The First Lawyer: Without producing any more evidence, Madam, we have the verdict in the bag.

The Governor's Wife: Shalva, my smelling salts!

Azdak: I think I understand you, woman.

The Governor's Wife: It's in rags!

Grusha: I've brought him up! Am I to tear him to pieces?

Azdak: Take your child and be off with it. I advise you not to stay in town with him.

5. Having prepared each character, take turns coming forward and describing the events of the scene in the third person and the past tense.

e.g. The Governor's Wife was not happy. She came to the court much against her will, holding a handkerchief to her nose in case of contamination from the common people and leaning heavily on the arm of her adjutant, Shalva. She recognised Grusha the kitchen maid ... etc.

6. If you have time, present this scene now in its entirety. It will have benefited from all the preliminary work you have done on it.

## WORK ON 'MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN'

In the play 'Mother Courage and her Children', Brecht addresses a subject that he finds unacceptable: war. He had already lived through one war and he wrote this play on the brink of another, in 1938. He intended the play as a warning, not a specific one against the conditions of his own time as in 'Arturo Ui', which is levelled particularly against Hitler, but against all war anywhere, any time.

He chose as his setting the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century, a war which ranged over most of Europe and about which the historian C.V. Wedgwood wrote, "Morally subversive, economically destructive, socially degrading, confused in its causes, devious in its course, futile in its result, it is the outstanding example in European history of meaningless conflict." What better example to choose if you want to make a point about the futility of all war? Brecht believed, like Wedgwood, that "war breeds only war;" it never solves anything.

He chose as the medium for his message the character of Anna Frierling, known as 'Mother Courage' in the play, an ironic title since the way she has survived to date is by changing sides according to who is winning. Thus she becomes a Catholic or a Protestant according to which army she finds herself among, as, too, does the Chaplain, originally a Protestant, who accompanies her for a time.

Mother Courage is accompanied by her three children and a wagon of goods which she sells indiscriminately to either army. Her eldest son, Eilif, is bold and daring. He joins the army, despite Mother Courage's advice to keep a low profile, and is rewarded by being made a hero for stealing some cattle from 'enemy' peasants when his regiment was starving. Near the end of the play, Eilif repeats this action but unfortunately a three-day truce has been declared; Eilif's action, the same for which he was eulogised in time of war, causes him to be shot in time of peace. Mother Courage, at the end of the play, is unaware of his death; she had been away trading when the army brought him to say his goodbyes before he was taken to be shot.

Swiss Cheese is her second son. He is somewhat simple. He becomes paymaster for a Swedish regiment. When the enemy Imperialists overrun the camp, Swiss Cheese hides the money to keep it safe; later he is accused of stealing that money and is condemned to death. The Sergeant is prepared to let him go if Mother Courage pays enough for his life, but she spends too long haggling and the Sergeant loses patience.

The youngest child is a girl, Katrin, who is dumb because "a soldier stuck something in her mouth when she was little." Damaged by soldiers she cannot have children but loves them very much. While her mother is away in the town making a quick profit on some cheap goods she has heard about, Katrin overhears soldiers planning an attack on the town. On hearing of the children who would be killed in the assault, she climbs onto a peasant's cottage roof and drums to wake the sleepers and save them. The sight of her anguish, emphasised by her lack of speech, is very moving and is the scene I have chosen for practical work, because of its confrontation with emotion.

Mother Courage is thus left at the end of the play, older but no wiser. Broken by the war and grief-stricken by the loss of her children, she hitches herself up to her wagon and carries on.

Brecht intended us to condemn Anna Frierling for the fact that she has learned nothing. Audiences, however, persisted in praising her pluck and saw her indomitable spirit to carry on doing what she knew best as proof of the heroism displayed by ordinary people in times of great trial. Brecht put this down to the expectations that audiences have from the theatre. They are used to empathising with central characters and finding heroism even where none is intended: "A deeply ingrained habit induces the audience in the theatre to pick out the more emotional aspects of the characters and to ignore the rest ... Mother Courage has learnt nothing." It particularly annoyed him that audiences found her inspiring when he had gone to such pains to mock concepts of heroism: Eilif loses his life by discovering that an act of heroism in time of war is a crime in peacetime; SwissCheese dies because he pointlessly protected a cashbox, an act of stupidity rather than heroism. Even the death of General Tilley is put down to straying into the front lines because he was lost in the fog, not to conscious heroism as history makes out.

Anna Frierling lives off the war and believes she would be ruined without it, though Brecht shows us many moments of choice where she could have done otherwise. These choices, or moments of 'not ... but', are particularly important in this play. We always have a choice, says Brecht. Mother Courage could give up her life, style and retire with the Cook in the inn he has inherited. She could have saved Swiss Cheese if she had not chosen to spend time bartering for a better price for her wagon.

The original setting for the play shows something of the 'epic' techniques that are by now becoming familiar. To make the music in the play 'separate', i.e. not flowing smoothly in and out of the speech in the scenes, something Brecht abhorred, a musical emblem was flown down before each song and the musicians were always visible in a stage-box. In other plays, Brecht advised that singers should emphasise that they were just about to sing by, for instance, standing up on a dais or a chair in order to sing out front. In other words, the characterisation was interrupted; an actor dropped character in order to sing what would be a comment on the character or the character's situation.

The original set of 'Mother Courage' was, to quote Brecht's own notebooks: "a permanent framework of huge screens, making use of such materials as were available in the military encampments of the seventeenth century: tenting, wooden poles lashed together with ropes, etc. Structures like the parsonage and the peasant's cottage were introduced three-dimensionally, using realistic building methods and materials, but in the form of an artistic indication, giving only as much of the structure as served the acting. Coloured projections were thrown on the cyclorama, and the revolving stage was used to convey travel."

Notice the emphasis on 'real' materials. It is a common mistake to attribute a totally representational set to Brechtian productions. He stressed that only such props and settings as were actually needed were used, but those there were had to be accurate. Particularly important to a man who champions the working classes is to honour working crafts. A chair on stage cannot be just any old plastic school chair; if it is a chair in a peasant's cottage, it must be lovingly made of wood, the kind of chair a peasant would have made for himself.

In the second production of 'Mother Courage,' Brecht added the now-familiar idea of harsh white lighting, used to expose all the equipment of the theatre to the audience and, as is made clear here, to break any emotional atmosphere that might otherwise build. Brecht says: "...we suspended the various countries' names above the stage in large black letters. Our lighting was white and even and as brilliant as our equipment allowed. This enabled us to get rid of any remnants of 'atmosphere' such as would have given the incidents a slightly romantic flavour."

## THE LAST TWO SCENES FROM 'MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN.'

CHARACTERS: The Lieutenant; The First Soldier; The Second Soldier; The Old Peasant; The Young Peasant; The Peasant Woman; Kattrin, who is dumb; Mother Courage.

### 11.

January 1636. Catholic troops threaten the Protestant town of Halle. The stone begins to speak. Mother Courage loses her daughter and journeys onwards alone, the war is not yet near its end.

*The wagon, very far gone now, stands near a farmhouse with a straw roof. It is night. Out of the wood comes a lieutenant and three soldiers in full armour.*

THE LIEUTENANT

And there mustn't be a sound: If anyone yells, cut him down.

THE FIRST SOLDIER

But we'll have to knock - if we want a guide.

THE LIEUTENANT

Knocking's a natural noise, it's all right, could be a cow hitting the wall of the cowshed.

*The soldiers knock at the farmhouse door. An old peasant woman enters. A hand is clapped over her mouth. Two soldiers enter.*

A MAN'S VOICE

What is it?

*The soldier brings out an old peasant and his son.*

THE LIEUTENANT *pointing to the wagon on which Kattrin has*

*appeared* There's one. A soldier pulls her out. Is this everybody that lives here?

THE PEASANTS *alternating*

That's our son. And that's a girl that can't talk. Her mother's in town buying up stocks because the shopkeepers are running away and selling cheap. They're canteen people.

THE LIEUTENANT

I'm warning you. Keep quiet. One sound and we'll crack you over the head with a pike. And I need someone to show us the path to the town. *He points to the young peasant.* You! Come here!

THE YOUNG PEASANT

I don't know any path!

THE SECOND SOLDIER *grinning*

He don't know any path!

THE YOUNG PEASANT

I don't help Catholics.

THE LIEUTENANT *to the second soldier*

Let him feel your pike in his side.

THE YOUNG PEASANT, *forced to his knees, the pike at his throat*

I'd rather die!

THE SECOND SOLDIER *again mimicking*

He'd rather die!

THE FIRST SOLDIER

I know how to change his mind. *He walks over to the cowshed.* Two cows and a bull. Listen, you.

If you aren't going to be reasonable, I'll sabre your cattle.

THE YOUNG PEASANT

Not the cattle!

THE PEASANT WOMAN *weeping*

Spare the cattle, captain, or we'll starve!

THE LIEUTENANT

If he must be pig-headed!

THE FIRST SOLDIER

I think I'll start with the bull.

THE YOUNG PEASANT *to the old one*

Do I have to? *The older one nods.* I'll do it.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Thank you, thank you, captain, for sparing us, for ever and ever, Amen.

*The old man stops her from going on thanking him.*

THE FIRST SOLDIER

I knew the bull came first all right!

*Led by the young peasant, the lieutenant, and the soldiers go on their way.*

THE OLD PEASANT

I wish we knew what it was. Nothing good, I suppose.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Maybe they're just scouts. What are you doing?

THE OLD PEASANT *setting a ladder against the roof and climbing up*

I'm seeing if they're alone. *On the roof.* Things are moving - all over. I can see armour. And a cannon. There must be more than a regiment. God have mercy on the town and all within!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Are there lights in the town?

THE OLD PEASANT

No, they're all asleep. He *climbs down.* There'll be an attack, and they'll all be slaughtered in their beds.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

The watchman'll give warning.

THE PEASANT

They must have killed the watchman in the tower on the hill or he'd have sounded his horn before this.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

If there were more of us...

THE OLD PEASANT

But being that we're alone with that cripple ...

THE PEASANT WOMAN

There's nothing we can do, is there?

THE OLD PEASANT

Nothing.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

We can't get down there. In the dark.

THE OLD PEASANT

The whole hillside's swarming with 'em.

THE PEASANT WOMAN

We could give a sign?

THE OLD PEASANT

And be cut down for it?

THE PEASANT WOMAN

No, there's nothing we can do. *To Kattrin:* Pray, poor thing, pray! There's nothing we can do to stop this bloodshed, so even if you can't talk, at least pray! He hears, if no one else does. I'll help you. *All kneel, Kattrin behind.* Our Father, which art in Heaven, hear our prayer, let not the town perish with all that lie therein asleep and fearing nothing. Wake them, that they rise and go to the walls and see the foe that comes with fire and sword in the night down the hill and across the fields. *Back to Kattrin:* God protect our mother and make the watchman not sleep but wake ere it's too late. And save our son-in-law, too, O God, he's there with his four children, let them not perish, they're innocent, they know nothing - *To Kattrin, who groans* - one of them's not two years old, the eldest is seven. *Kattrin rises, troubled.* Heavenly Father, hear us, only Thou canst help us or we die, for we are weak and have no sword nor nothing; we cannot trust our own strength but only Thine, O Lord; we are in Thy hands, our cattle, our farm, and the town too, we're all in Thy hands, and the foe is nigh unto the walls with all his power. *Kattrin, unperceived, has crept off to the wagon, has taken something out of it, put it under her apron, and has climbed up the ladder to the roof.* Be mindful of the children in danger, especially the little ones, be mindful of the old folk who cannot move, and of all Christian souls, O Lord.

THE OLD PEASANT

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Amen.

*Sitting on the roof, Kattrin takes a drum from under her apron and starts to beat it.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Heavens, what's she doing?

THE OLD PEASANT

She's out of her mind!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Get her down, quick! *The old peasant runs to the ladder but Kattrin pulls it up on the roof.*

She'll get us in trouble.

THE OLD PEASANT

Stop it this instant, you silly cripple!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

The soldiers'll come!

THE OLD PEASANT *looking for stones*

I'll stone you!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Have you no pity, have you no heart? We have relations there too, four grandchildren, but there's nothing we can do. If they find us now, it's the end, they'll stab us to death! *Kattrin is staring into the far distance, towards the town. She goes on drumming.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN *to the peasant*

I told you not to let that riffraff in your farm. What do *they care* if we lose our cattle?

THE LIEUTENANT, *running back with soldiers and the young peasant*

I'll cut you all to bits!

THE PEASANT WOMAN

We're innocent, sir, there's nothing we can do. She did it, a stranger!

THE LIEUTENANT

Where's the ladder?

THE OLD PEASANT

On the roof.

THE LIEUTENANT *calling*

Throw down the drum. I order you! *Kattrin goes on drumming.* You're all in this, but you won't live to tell the tale.

THE OLD PEASANT

They've been cutting down fir trees around here. If we bring a tall enough trunk we can knock her off the roof...

THE FIRST SOLDIER *to the lieutenant*

I beg leave to make a suggestion. *He whispers something to the lieutenant, who nods.* Listen, you! We have an idea - for your own good. Come down and go with us to the town. Show us your mother and we'll spare her.

*Kattrin goes on drumming.*

THE LIEUTENANT *pushing him away*

She doesn't trust you, no wonder with your face. *He calls up to Kattrin.* Hey, you! Suppose I give you my word? I'm an officer, my word's my bond! *Kattrin drums harder.* Nothing is sacred to her.

THE YOUNG PEASANT

Sir, it's not just because of her mother!

THE FIRST SOLDIER

This can't go on, they'll hear it in the town as sure as hell.

THE LIEUTENANT

We must make another noise with something. Louder than that drum. What can we make a noise with?

THE FIRST SOLDIER

But we mustn't make a noise!

THE LIEUTENANT

A harmless noise, fool, a peacetime noise!

THE OLD PEASANT

I could start chopping wood.

THE LIEUTENANT

That's it! *The peasant brings his axe and chops away.* Chop! Chop harder! Chop for your life! *Kattrin has been listening, beating the drum less hard. Very upset, and peering around, she now goes on drumming.* It's not enough. *To the first soldier.* You chop too!

THE OLD PEASANT

I've only one axe. *He stops chopping.*

THE LIEUTENANT

We must set fire to the farm. Smoke her out.

THE OLD PEASANT

That's no good, Captain. When they see fire from the town, they'll know everything.

*During the drumming Kattrin has been listening again. Now she laughs.*

THE LIEUTENANT

She's laughing at us, that's too much, I'll have her guts if it's the last thing I do. Bring a musket!

*Two soldiers off. Kattrin goes on drumming.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN

I have it, Captain. That's their wagon over there, Captain. If we smash that, she'll stop. It's all they have, Captain.

THE LIEUTENANT *to the young peasant* Smash it! *calling.* If you don't stop that noise, we'll smash your wagon!

*The young peasant deals the wagon a couple of feeble blows with a board.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN *to Kattrin*

Stop, you little beast!

*Kattrin stares at the wagon and pauses. Noises of distress come out of her. But she goes on drumming.*

THE LIEUTENANT

Where are those sons of bitches with that gun?

THE FIRST SOLDIER

They can't have heard anything in the town or we'd hear their cannon.

THE LIEUTENANT *calling*

They don't hear. And now we're going to shoot you. I'll give you one more chance: throw down that drum!

THE YOUNG PEASANT *dropping the board, screaming to Kattrin*

Don't stop now! Or they're all done for. Go on, go on, go on ...

*The soldier knocks him down and beats him with his pike. Kattrin starts crying but goes on drumming.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Not in the back, you're killing him!

*The soldiers arrive with the musket.*

THE SECOND SOLDIER

The Colonel's foaming at the mouth. We'll be courtmartialled.

THE LIEUTENANT

Set it up! Set it up! *Calling while the musket is set up on forks.* Once and for all: stop that drumming! *Still crying, Kattrin is drumming as hard as she can. Fire! The soldiers fire. Kattrin is hit. She gives the drum another feeble beat or two, then slowly collapses.*

THE LIEUTENANT

That's an end to the noise.

*But the last beats of the drum are lost in the din of cannon from the town. Mingled with the thunder of cannon, alarm-bells are heard in the distance.*

THE FIRST SOLDIER

She did it.

*Towards morning. The drums and pipes of troops on the march, receding. In front of the wagon Mother Courage sits by Kattrin's body. The peasants of the last scene are standing near.*

THE PEASANTS

You must leave, woman. There's only one regiment to go. You can never get away by yourself.

MOTHER COURAGE

Maybe she's fallen asleep.

*She sings:*

Lullay, lullay, what's that in the hay?

The neighbour's babes cry but mine are gay.

The neighbour's babes are dressed in dirt:

Your silks were cut from an angel's skirt.



They are all starving: you have a cake;  
If it's too stale, you need but speak.  
Lullay, lullay, what's rustling there?  
One lad fell in Poland. The other is where?

You shouldn't have told her about the children.

THE PEASANTS

If you hadn't gone off to the town to get your cut, maybe it wouldn't have happened.

MOTHER COURAGE

She's asleep now.

THE PEASANTS

She's not asleep, it's time you realised. She's gone. You must get away. There are wolves in these parts. And the bandits are worse.

MOTHER COURAGE

That's right.

*She goes and fetches a cloth from the wagon to cover up the body.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN

Have you no one now? Someone you can go to?

MOTHER COURAGE

There's one. My Eilif.

THE PEASANT *while Mother Courage covers the body*

Find him then. Leave her to us. We'll give her a proper burial. You needn't worry.

MOTHER COURAGE

Here's money for the expenses.

*She pays the peasant. The peasant and his son shake her hand and carry Katrin away.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN *also taking her hand, and bowing, as she goes away*

Hurry!

MOTHER COURAGE *harnessing herself to the wagon.*

I hope I can pull the wagon by myself. Yes, I'll manage, there's not much in it now. I must start up again in business. *Another regiment passes at the rear with pipe and drum. Mother Courage starts pulling the wagon.* Hey! Take me with you!

*Soldiers are heard singing:*

Dangers, surprises, devastations -  
The war takes hold and will not quit.  
But though it lasts three generations  
We shall get nothing out of it.  
Starvation, filth, and cold enslave us.  
The army robs us of our pay,  
Only a miracle can save us  
And miracles have had their day.  
Christians, awake! The winter's gone!  
The snows depart. The dead sleep on.  
And though you may not long survive  
Get out of bed and look alive!

Katrin's death is emotional by any standards but Brecht allows it because, for his message to be most effective he has to show us what happens to goodness in a world turned topsy-turvy by war. The silent figure of Katrin throughout the play is the most potent gestic symbol he could have lit upon. Even her silence is part of the gest. Virtue goes under before the evils of war.

## **Practical Work**

**1. Having read this extract, which is the end of the play, discuss what the message is and how, if you were directing it, you would get that message over. This means taking into account the staging elements of set, costume and props. Decide what features would help communicate your message. Look back at the notes I have included from Brecht's own productions to help start off your ideas.**

**Note that the heading of scene 11, "January 1636...etc" tells the audience what is going to happen in the scene to take away the element of surprise, but is not necessarily the gest of the scene. Gest has to include attitude and the caption, which would have been projected onto the white half-curtain or a screen, does not indicate any attitude to the events to come. What attitude does Brecht want us to have to war and to his central character? How could you convey this?**

**2. Look first at the soldiers. The lieutenant and three soldiers are asked for but only two of the latter speak. What would you want to exaggerate about them to convey the fear they instil in the peasants. Their coarseness and brutality comes over; they have become instruments of war. Still Brecht treats them with some humour, similar to the Ironshirts in 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle', though less overplayed. Would you differentiate between the soldiers, or between the Lieutenant and the other soldiers?**

**Divide into groups of three or four. One is to be the Lieutenant, the other to be the soldiers. Decide on their attitude to war and how best to convey that through apt voice, facial expression and body language. Remember to exaggerate whatever features will help convey your gest. Now present each character's attitude to war and their part with in this scene through a narrated monologue. Use the third person and the past tense for this, e.g. 'The Lieutenant was feeling proud to be able to show off his power and his authority ... etc.'**

**3. Now look at the peasants. What is Brecht trying to convey through them? It is clear that they just want to get rid of the soldiers as fast as possible and get on with their lives with as little damage done as possible. Would you differentiate between them? Can you account for the Young Peasant's sudden outburst of encouragement to Katrin? Knowing this outburst is coming, would this mean playing the Young Peasant differently from the beginning of the scene?**

Are these characters ones that need exaggeration? Your answer will depend very much on what you feel Brecht is trying to use them for. Notice how different the peasants are in the final short scene. Why?

In pairs, work on the dialogue between the Old Peasant and the Peasant Woman beginning: Old Peasant: 'I wish we knew what it was... and ending: The Peasant Woman: I told you not to let that riffraff in your farm. What do they care if we lose our cattle?' Try to convey your attitude to the parts through clear body language, exaggeration where necessary and humour, to point out the choices the two peasants are making. It should be clear that they could do something about the sleeping town if they weren't so afraid. Their choice and the moment of decision should be identified in some way.

4. By taking away Katrin's voice, far more expressive power is given to her facial expression, body language and the sounds of distress she can still make. With everybody demonstrating Katrin, make frozen expressive statues of the following moments; they should become a kind of sequence:

The Old Peasant: They must have killed the watchman ...

The Peasant Woman: Pray, poor thing, pray! .....

.....God protect our mother .....Oh God, he's there with his four children .....one of them's not two years old, the eldest is seven .....the foe is nigh unto the walls ....Heavens, what's she doing?

The Lieutenant: I'm an officer, my word's my bond!

The Lieutenant: Chop for your life!

The Lieutenant: She's laughing at us.

The young Peasant: Go on, go on, go on ...

The Lieutenant: That's an end to the noise.

Having worked out the sequence of gesticulations, ask one or two volunteers to string them together. The whole sequence should flow with just the briefest pause on each 'still.'

5. Compose group tableaux of the following moments, making sure that the gesticulation of the whole scene is clear, as well as the individual gesticulations of each character within it. I have quoted them in the order in which they occur:

The Lieutenant: Is this everybody that lives here?

The Second Soldier: He'd rather die!

The Old Peasant: Stop it this minute, you silly cripple!

The Old Peasant: I could start chopping wood.

The Lieutenant: That's an end to the noise.

The First Soldier: She did it. Mother Courage: Maybe she's fallen asleep. Mother Courage: I hope I can pull the wagon by myself.

Mother Courage: Hey! Take me with you!

6. If you have time, present the whole scene now in its entirety. It will have benefited from all the preliminary work you have done.

## CONCLUSION - CULINARY AND EPIC THEATRE

Unlike Stanislavski, who goes through the whole range of the actor's craft and gives us considered opinions, exercises and the wealth of many years of real experience to savour, Brecht takes a great deal for granted. He does not give us a recipe book, an actor's ABC as to how to prepare for a role. We can assume that much of the technical craft of an actor is the same as for a Stanislavskian actor: an actor should have, in other words, a versatile body and voice; the basic tools and the kind of exercises to increase the flexibility of these tools would be similar whatever method of acting one favours.

So we can assume that a Brechtian actor would have a strong and versatile body and voice. More emphasis would be laid on comedy and parody, which calls for a more extreme type of body language, facial gestures and vocal tones. Preparation work would be more on the discovery of the play's gestic qualities, i.e. its social messages and how to convey them, than on individual characterisation. Character is subservient to message so the inner life is not important and only such characteristics that help convey recognisable situations and types of behaviour within these situations matter. A clear uncluttered style of movement with strong visual emphasis becomes very important. Facial expression must also be clear. We need to see 'types' and the decisions of the main characters instantly. We don't expect to empathise with characters, but we do expect to feel in collusion with them, understanding why they have acted as they do and either applauding or condemning as we are invited.

The order in which I have suggested work on the texts gives a usable order for an actor approaching a part in a Brechtian fashion:

1. Identification of the gest of the whole play, a team effort.
2. Identification of how each character fits with this central gest. Characters will be either serving the message[gest] directly or by contrast or conflict with it.
3. Establishment of the gest of your own character which could need exaggeration or be more 'real.'
4. Understanding the storyline. Retelling by use of narrative techniques.
5. Identifying 'Not...But' moments of decision and finding ways of pointing them.
6. Working on the character, using Verfremdungseffekt techniques such as role-swapping, third person and past tense narration.
7. Freeze-framing key-moments and checking for clarity and gest.

The main difference with the above work is that, apart from the learning of lines, which Brecht encouraged to be done as far as possible during the actual rehearsals, everything is done together with the rest of the actors and director. It is an extremely ensemble way of working.

I think by now it is clear that there is a Brechtian style and that that style is achievable even without the Communist standpoint that motivated Brecht himself. Epic theatre is itself a style and can be summed up in much the same way as Brecht himself did when comparing it with what he called 'culinary theatre', i.e. dramatic theatre. [ Why 'culinary'? - well, because it is a theatre for consumers, it 'gives them what they want,' like a drug, or food and drink; it simply 'feeds' their already satiated bodies without challenging them.]

Culinary, or Dramatic theatre, then:

- carries the spectator along into following a linear plot;
- does not challenge him to think or question;
- shows human beings as being the same whatever point of history or different social structures the play comes from ;
- does not suggest any possibility of change or escape for humanity, who are seen as individuals stuck in unalterable situations.

Epic theatre:

- covers a wide span of years in an episodic way, not necessarily in chronological order, each scene separated and standing on its own;
- forces the audience to think and reason rather than just to 'feel' with the characters they are watching;
- shows human beings and society to be alterable.

Above all, I feel, Brecht never patronises an audience. Audiences did misunderstand him, often, and this puzzled and saddened him. He was really the first to give 'power' of a rational kind to audiences and to assume that they would want it. Even though he did not really expect audiences to rush out and change the world instantly, he did expect them to debate together, see things differently and perhaps eventually bring about change that way.

I don't hold with the opinion that Brecht is outdated, lost in the backwash of the sinking ship of Communism. His method of going about things works for any kind of forum theatre, educational theatre or any theatre where the actors and director want to put over a point of view. And he has also given us some wonderful plays that, provided they are not killed stone-dead by heavy-handed directors desperate to 'get it right' and be 'true to Brecht' - these kind of directors often miss the point of his irony and fun - are playable with lightness and humour, whilst still communicating their messages.