Theoretical Perspectives on Popular Theatre

In this chapter I shall briefly discuss some of the salient practices of democratic art and theatre forms in the 20th century. However, I shall begin my discussion with the centuries old European performance tradition of the Commedia Dell'arte, for it is the Commedia Dell'arte which a large number of progressive theatre artists of 20th century Europe chose to adopt through a process of selection and alteration. In Commedia Dell'arte they traced a lineage of oppositional and non-conformist performances.

The Commedia Dell'arte

The Commedia Dell'arte was an actors' theatre. In medieval Europe, the *arte* meant a guild of craftsmen. There also existed guilds of carpenters, silkworkers, masons and so on. The guilds were aimed at reducing the differences between various craftsmen involved in the same profession so that they may not work to each others' detriment, and also they enabled them to stand with each other against the might of the powerful, the big merchants, the princes, bishops or cardinals. The Commedia Dell'arte was a theatre of dialogue and action, spoken monologues and performed action and mime. It was acrobatic and used masks.¹ The Commedia Dell'arte was a peripatetic theatre. The Commedia improvisation stems from the carnival tradition with very obvious associations of transgression and upturning of the norms of social behaviour. In being so it was distinct from the Commedia Erudita which was an amateur theatre of the learned elite. Unlike the Commedia Dell'arte which was performed in open spaces and fair grounds among the common folk, Commedia Erudita was restricted to the courts and the performance was replete with classical modes.²

As the Commedia Dell'arte was a subaltern form we do not have detailed records of its history and evolution. It is only traceable from written accounts of travelers, some aristocratic observers, or official records maintained by the law-keepers. The earliest extant record of the form is from 1545 which mentions the formation of an Italian professional acting troupe in Padua.³ The first mention of

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³ Ibid. xv.
Italian Commedia Dell'arte troupes in France occurs in 1570. Though the Commedia was most prevalent in Italy over the centuries it spread to most of continental Western Europe and also Eastern Europe as far as Russia, through the Italian touring companies as well as indigenous troupes. Wherever Commedia went it adjusted to the local conditions and added to its acceptability across climes.

Since much of the records of Commedia are from sources in civil and ecclesiastical authorities, these records speak of the performance form as a social nuisance. Various forms of strictures were imposed on it. According to a diary entry of an Italian official, Tommaso Garzoni in the 1580s:

> lords have banished them from their lands, the law holds them in contempt, different nations scorn them in a variety of ways and the whole world, as if punish them for their improper conduct, rightly rejects them. [...] licenses and permits have to be sought on every side if they wish to act and earn their living, because everyone is sickened by their vile race that spreads disarray everywhere and introduces a thousand scandals where ever it goes. 4

The Jesuits placed censor control on the content of the Commedia – the comic, the drunk, the meddling female, or any character which threatened to create a controversy or a challenge to ecclesiastical authority were banished from the stage. According to Dario Fo, what the church feared most was laughter, ‘because laughter denotes a critical awareness; it signifies imagination, intelligence and a rejection of all fanaticism’. 5 But the Commedia actors found way to bypass these strictures. When in Paris, Italian Commedia troupes were prohibited from using dialogues in fairs, they had to return to juggling, tumbling, dancing, pantomiming and singing. Since the Commedia players could never be sure of proper performance conditions they had to make arrangements for temporary, improvised platforms for performance. Since, they were professionals and had to earn their living by displaying their skill the Commedia Dell'arte actors had to develop techniques to attract the crowd, or wherever they could hope to escape the guards. They had to set up their performance platform at places where a crowd was likely to gather. Once attracted, the audience had to be held in attention. One of the characters Zanni spoke in a loud coarse voice, almost like a porter who had to make himself heard over the other traders. The Commedia players often tied up with a variety of charlatans – the quack, the medicine man, the astrologer, or the magician. The Commedia, thus, developed a live give-and-take relationship with its audience. The closeness of the audience to the performance made it virtually impossible for the lawkeepers to keep a strict watch on the performances. There was therefore, an opportunity to enter into a conspiratorial relationship with the audiences, over the shoulder comments with the ‘just-between-you-and-me’ tone, to comment on the powers that be – an

5 Fo op cit. 109.
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effect that the audiences would enjoy and it would endear them to the Commedia players. Very often their performances would go beyond mere entertainment and would rally against the organized theft of the landlords, against the merchants, against the corrupt Roman clergy. There are, in fact, evidences of leaflets and other propaganda material, complete with caricature sketches and satirical poems, which were confiscated from 'errant' actors who were brought to trial for treason.⁶

One of the most prominent features of the Commedia Dell'arte was the use of masks. These masks, mostly made of leather, resembled shapes of animals and represented a particular character of the Commedia. Dario Fo, points out that it was only the lower characters – the Zanni, the Pantalone, the Arlecchino – who had particular masks assigned to them. The higher characters – the knights, the nobility, the bankers – appeared in person, for no one dared 'cock a snook' at them.⁷ Though the mask was heavy, caused sweat, and physically uncomfortable to carry, once the actor got used to it he could act with greater liberty with his face uncovered. The mask allowed him to leave aside his own personality and improvise on the personality of the mask. For the mask itself is not enough to represent a character. The actor has to use the unmasked parts of his body – his limbs – to imitate the gestures and movements of the character. Though there were a lot of scope for improvisation, where every actor could bring in his own elements into a particular scene, the exits, the entrances and the stock gestures remained constant.

In modern times the Commedia Dell'arte traditions have been used by many artists, the most notable of them being Stravinsky, Diaghilev, Cocteau, Picasso, Bussoni as well as the movies of Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and the Marx Brothers.

Romain Rolland and the People's Theatre

The French novelist and dramatist Romain Rolland (1866-1944) and his work were part of the revolutionary energies that existed in Europe in the later half of the 19th century. In his plays he used historical plots to explicate the workings of revolutionary moments. The experiences of the French Revolution formed an important part of his material. But it was not only for writing plays about the revolution that Rolland is known. He looked towards transforming the theatre of his times from an elitist stage to a wider and a more democratic theatre. He encapsulated the insights and ideas which he gained from his experiences in The People's Theatre (1903). In this book Rolland outlines various aspects of a more accessible theatre which would energize the revolutionary potential of the working classes. Enumerating some of the objectives of a People's Theatre Rolland wrote that its first function is to

⁶ Fo op cit. 86.
⁷ Ibid. 22.
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entertain the people. People’s Theatre would not speak to the people in prescriptive tones. Instead of grimly representing the grimness of oppression, People’s Theatre should encourage the optimism that exists within the people. The People’s dramatist should be a guide and a teacher and not dictate to the people. People’s theatre must teach and enable the people to observe and judge their own reality. It should set the people to thinking and doing and not think and do for them. Rolland’s ideas have had a tremendous influence on progressive writers and theatre workers across the world. In fact the Indian People’s Theatre Association took its name from Rolland’s book.

Soviet Socialist Realism

The October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia which can be said to be a trigger of the march of the socialist literature across the human world in the 20th century, is a phenomenon which is a matter of much debate for both the supporters and the opponents of the revolution. This is even more true for the aesthetic and cultural aspects of the revolution. Since, we live our own lives in a world where the opponents of the revolution have gained an upperhand we must first consider their judgment. To the opponents of the revolution the theories of Socialist Realism which formed the mainstay of Soviet intervention in the arts, was a fall out of dictatorial Stalinist policies, designed to control free intervention of the imagination. It is taken to be an imposition which restricts experimentation and is ahistorical. This thinking itself emerges from an ahistorical analysis of the development of art in Russia and looks upon Socialist Realism as a rootless offshoot of the political changes of 1917. It, in fact, looks upon the revolution itself as a coup d’etat imposed upon the Russian society by the Bolsheviks against the laws of nature. The supporters of the revolution, however, argue that a political movement can only be successful if it adapts itself to the conditions prevailing in the country where the revolution is in progress. And hence, the theories of Socialist Realism as proposed in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union developed progressively out of the literature and art of the pre-revolutionary era. The ‘coup d’etat’ itself could not be said to be one which was executed according to a blue print. C. Vaughan James points out the need to reconcile ‘two apparently contradictory images of the Soviet Communist – that of the cold, calculating planner, the engineer of the human soul on the one hand, and that of the basically unprepared, emotional revolutionary, reacting in near panic to circumstances beyond his control, on the other.” The literature and art of 19th century Russia – the poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov; the writings of Gogol, Turgenev, Chernyshevsky and Tolstoy; the plays of Ostrovsky; the paintings of Kranskovsky, Surikov and Repin; and the music of Glinka, Chaikovsky, Borodin, Dargomyzhsky and Rimsky-Korsakov – were all instrumental in the

development of a critical consciousness and a rallying against repressive values within the Russian feudal order. Further more, Mayakovsky's poetry, the satire of Demyan Bedny and the posters of Moor and Deni were intrinsic to the campaign during the Russian Civil War and the struggles leading up to the Revolution. Socialist Realism along with the other theories of aesthetics was an attempt to further these gains. Socialist Realism was not against experimentation, for it was itself an experiment which tried to link artistic endeavour to the needs of the revolution.

In its early years, the thrust of Soviet government’s cultural policy was towards popularizing the ideas of the revolution and the programmes of the collectivization particularly among the peasantry, an all out attack on illiteracy, education of children and bringing the various national minorities into cultural mainstream through an ambitious programme of translating works from the national languages to Russian and vice versa. In this situation the literary and aesthetic debate that occurred between the various groups were rooted in the debate over the direction of the communist movement in the country. It was really one of the many debates which raged over the political and structural changes of the Soviet society and were manifestations of the conflict between the possibility of building communism in one country. The debate was actually one regarding the control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU] and was clinched only when the efforts towards facilitating the ‘world revolution’ were called off. The theatres and other artistic infrastructure were naturalized and the Prolekult was brought under the control of the Communist Party in 1920. The reason it took the Party three long years to settle the matters of aesthetics was its preoccupation with other matters, it was busy carrying out the revolution.

Between 1920 and 1932 three major documents were adopted by the CPSU to pronounce its policies towards literature and art: On the Prolekults [1920], On the Party’s policy in the field of literature [1925], and On the reformation of literary and artistic organizations [1932]. These, along with Lenin’s article On Party Organization and Party Literature [1905] and his speech In Memory of Herzen [1912], form the seminal texts which document the evolution of Soviet Socialist Realism. According to these documents and according to the practice of art in the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism concerns itself with certain important questions: the organic relationship between art of the past and the art of the present and the future; the class nature of art; its objective reflection of social relations; and the functions of art in the society – the obligations of the artist to the society in which he works; and therefore, the relationship between the artist and the politician. The directives on these questions are to be found in the form of three aesthetic principles: narodnost or ‘people-ness’ – the relationship between art and the masses;

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klassnost or ‘class-ness’ – the class characteristics of art; and partiinost or ‘party-ness’ – the identification of the artist with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.10 The principle of narodnost lays down that truly popular works are those which bear the most progressive tendencies of their times. It is possible that some of these works may actually appear ahead of their times, which though they are built of the elements of the present epoch, contain the essences of future times. It is this high degree of narodnost which preserves the worth of the work in subsequent epochs. Klassnost concerns the analysis of class contradictions as presented in the work and the position it takes vis-a-vis this contradiction. Klassnost leads the artist to present a materialist view of reality. The essence of partiinost is the open allegiance of the art to the cause of the working class, and the work as a means to further socialism. Partiinost is not seen as incompatible with freedom, rather it creates conditions for the artist to realize her/his own ideological aspirations.11 Partiinost reflects the highest desirable level of communist art, but it cannot be devoid of the two other principles. Therefore, Socialist Realism makes a threefold demand from the revolutionary artist: 1) that art must fulfil a specific social function; 2) that the above function is to further the interests of the masses; and 3) that to further the interests of the masses, art must become part of the activity of the Communist Party.

Konstantin Stanislavski

Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a Russian theatre director who lived and worked through the years of the revolution. He revolutionized the art of acting. Yet he was not a dedicated Marxist and has been criticized by many Marxists for his apolitical approach to art and his hatred of propaganda. Stanislavski is known in the history of theatre as the founder of the ‘Stanislavski system’. He freed theatre of old manners of acting based on artificial pathos and declamation which formed the basis of the star system, where the actor was larger than the character. He devised a series of acting exercises which enabled the actor to prepare her/himself for enacting a particular character. The proposition was simple – it may be “difficult to discover what the ‘given circumstances’ of old age are. But once found it is not difficult to retain them by means of technique.”12 Without preparation, the actor has to rely on the metaphysical ‘inspiration’ to recreate the passion, and therefore, the reliance on individual talent to be ‘inspired’. By reducing ‘inspiration’ to a conscious process, Stanislavsky alters the actor’s role to that of a studier of reality. To live the life of another person – the character in question – the actor must be an observer and performer at the same time. According to him, before enacting a character, the actor must study the character from all aspects, and this opens up the possibility of

10 James op cit. 1.
11 Ibid. passim.
12 Stanislavski (1986). 35.
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studying the character from the perspective of class analysis. This system of characterization hides the actor's personality, and enables the complete exploration of all aspects of the character.

Stanislavski has been attacked for his apolitical approach to theatre, particularly by Brecht who criticized the Stanislavski 'method' as one which can be used by theatre persons belonging to any class position. But Utpal Dutt reminds us that Brecht's criticism of Stanislavski is political and not methodological. Stanislavski, by breaking the old 'actor system' had created the possibility of a democratic concern in the theatre, and his method created scope for a materialist interpretation in the theatre.\textsuperscript{13}

Vsevolod Meyerhold

Unlike Stanislavski, Vsevold Meyerhold (1874-1940) declared his partisanship for the revolution, and for the Bolshevik Party. But Meyerhold had commenced his theatrical experimentation much before his joining the Bolsheviks, when he chose to abandon the Realism on the stage. He initiated the technique of stylized theatre which achieves several ends. It liberates the actor from the scenery. With the development of technical devices the stage had become a place for display of technological spectacles. It took away the power of the actor. Stylized acting restored the power to the actor. It also compelled the spectator to use her/his imagination creatively to fill in the details which were suggested by the action.

These experiments did not find favour with the Czarist government and Meyerhold and his colleagues were placed under tremendous pressure. It was the desire to protect their right to artistic experimentation that drove Meyerhold to join the Bolshevik Party almost at the eve of the revolution of 1917, a time when it was extremely difficult to predict as to which way 'the tide would turn'. In the fighting that ensued, Meyerhold was arrested and imprisoned by the White Army. He was later rescued by the Red Army and placed in important positions under the Soviet government.

After the revolution Meyerhold continued to develop newer techniques for the stage. He sought to revive the Commedia Dell'arte techniques for the first professional post-revolution production \textit{Mystery-Bouffe} [1918], based on Mayakovsky's play. Meyerhold conceived his plays as 'theatre meeting'. In his 1920 production, \textit{The Dawn}, entry was free, leaflets were distributed and dialogues spoken in a declamatory manner. For his other productions he collaborated with other artists like painters. The stage would also be built like a ramp so that the action could happen almost among the

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Audience. The audience was allowed to smoke and utter comments.¹⁴

But Meyerhold fell out of favour with the Soviet government. He was accused of being an anti-Soviet formalist who failed to respond to the demands of political accuracy. He was arrested and executed in 1940.

Art in the Chinese Revolution

From the very early stages of the Chinese communist movement great attention was paid to the role of arts and theatre in the furthering of the revolution. This is perhaps a resultant of the sources of the Chinese communist movement and its leadership. The Chinese theoretician and communist leader Chu Chiù Pai classified the development of the progressive cultural movement in China into three stages.

The first stage was between 1915 and 1925 and is more famously known as the May Fourth period. The May Fourth movement which was characterized by a demand for vernacularization of Chinese culture and education. Till then all classical literature in China was composed in a language which was unintelligible to the common people. Though the vernacular was used as a language for popular entertainment in ballads and opera, it was not considered by the scholars to be ‘true literature’. Through the involvement of young scholars and intellectuals the Chinese government was forced to introduce reforms such as introduction of vernacular Chinese as the chief language of instruction in schools and the official declaration of vernacular Chinese as the national language of China in 1921. Following these developments there was a hunt for creation of new literatures in the vernacular languages. For this, the young writers and intellectuals, most of whom had received Western education, turned to Western models of literature. Many leading European writers and poets were translated into Chinese. As a result of the influence of Western literature and Western literary theories, Chinese literature was freed from old dogmas and encouraged new ways of expression. This had an extremely liberating effect on the Chinese middle class intellectuals and harbingered the Chinese communist movement. The May Fourth movement was the chief source of revolutionary leadership in China for the next half-century – Cen Tu-hsiu, Mao Tse-tung, Ten Chung-hsia, Chang Kuo-tao, Chu En-lai and Chu Chiù Pai.

The second stage ranged from 1925 to 1927. According to Chu, the contradictions in this stage were not literary or cultural but political. The question was: once a mass movement had been generated in which the people had sought empowerment through the vernacular language, what were the

¹⁴ Braun (1998) and Sahni (1980).
attitudes of the middle class intellectuals vis-a-vis further radicalization of the movement? And this
contradiction had at its focus the mass which was generated by the Kuomintang-Communist United
Front against the colonial and feudal forces. A large section of the middle class writers who were
Europeanized in their attitudes feared a loss in their prestige and privilege and were not enthusiastic
about forging ahead with the ‘anti-feudal’ and ‘anti-imperialist’ movements. It was at this time that the
slogan of “from literary revolution to revolutionary literature” was raised and the sections of the
progressive writers were influenced by Marxists thought. Unimpressed by Western literary models they
sought to look towards Soviet models along with a greater interest in Marxism-Leninism.

The third stage which commenced from 1928 was a period of political radicalization. Chu Chiu
Pai was the first to criticize aspects of the May Fourth intellectual revolution for being unable to mark
a break from the Western models and called for a rejection of Western models. This was a time when
the contradictions within the revolutionary camp sharpened. The exigencies of war time propaganda
forced open the contradictions where those who stood against the Japanese resorted to develop a
national literature of defence through native forms. When the Chinese Communist Party and the Red
Army shifted base to the Yenan province, it worked amongst a more culturally starved peasant
population. Writers and artists who were sympathetic to the Communists were invited by the Party to
Yenan to study the culture and language of the people and produce art and literature which helped
advance the revolution. In his talks at the Yenan Forum in 1942, Mao defined the stage as one in
which communism needed to be popularized at a massive scale and not one in which communism is to
be implemented. The people were to be enthused with the idea of communism so that they could join
the fight to build it.15

In 1949, when the Communist Party entered the cities it now had to address more
sophisticated audiences. This new challenge led to a conflict between the demands of an art for the
movement and individual desires of the artists. In winter 1953, Russian drama instructors were invited
to teach in Beijing and Shanghai, and the Stanislavsky system was systematically introduced into
Chinese theatres. The next great challenge facing art in China was during the years of the Great Leap
when the slogan of ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’ was raised to confront the ‘Capitalist Roaders’.
Playwrights were made to pledge quotas of plays to the Party and a strict and almost arbitrary
censorship was imposed. Collective writing of plays was used to keep a check on the playwrights. The
extent to which the art and artists influenced the Chinese Party and politics was evident from the fact
that the Cultural Revolution was actually triggered off by the reactions to an allegorical play Hai Rui.

15 See McDougall (1971) and Pickowicz (1981).
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*Baoguan* [Hai Rui Dismissed From Office] written by Wu Han in 1961. The work made critical references to the ‘Gang of Four’ and the influence it held over Mao Tse-tung and the policies pursued by the Communist Party. It first appeared as a short story by Wu Han in 1959. Later it was adapted as an opera or stage play and was revised seven times. The play was banned. The playwright jailed, tortured till he died. The Chinese Party later recognized the excesses committed during the Cultural Revolution and recognized the role of Mao Tse-tung in leading the Chinese people. Despite the excesses, the Cultural Revolution represents an important and a bold step which was taken by the CPC to address the question of transforming social consciousness, questions which have baffled Communist Parties the world over. It also addressed certain important aesthetic questions. The leadership of the Cultural Revolution proposed that the correct way to confront the bourgeoisie in the realm of literature was through appeals to the emotions, more than through reasons. And therefore, characterization took on an important part along with creation of heroes and images.\(^\text{16}\)

**Brecht, Piscator and the Epic Theatre**

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht along with his dramaturg colleague Erwin Piscator put forward the most articulate challenge to the most well established poetics of theatre — that of Aristotle. Brecht confronted Aristotle’s poetics with his concept of the Epic Theatre. Epic theatre is non-Aristotelian in that it eliminates empathy — it appeals to the reason of the spectator rather than her/his emotions, it makes its audience think materialistically and not ideologically. According to Brecht, the audience for a proscenium play ‘hangs its brains up in the cloakroom along with its coat’.\(^\text{17}\) Epic theatre does not lead to a purgation of emotions but consolidates them. Thus, if Aristotelian theatre pacifies the spectator, Epic theatre activates and mobilizes her/him. If Aristotelian theatre is status-quoist, Brechtian Epic theatre is political. The Epic theatre is an attempt to capture the dialectic between learning and entertainment which as we have seen is an essential tenet of Marxist art. It achieves this through a constant dialectic between the action which is shown and the attitude of showing an action on stage.\(^\text{18}\) The Epic actor must, therefore, be a demonstrator. Her/his private feelings must continue to remain private and yet while portraying a character (s)he must also display her/his own attitude of showing the character to the audience. In Epic theatre the actor must study the character before portrayal but must not identify with the character, and also not allow the spectator to identify with the character. Thus Epic theatre must report. It must allow the spectator a scope for verification of a particular character or scene with other characters or scenes in the play or with similar elements in

\(^\text{16}\) See Tung (1987); Judd (1987); and Huaibwen (1989).

\(^\text{17}\) Brecht (1979) 27.

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realism. Thus, the Realism which Epic theatre explores is an exposure of reality and not merely an exposition. It exposes reality not as immutable but as mutable. Epic theatre is against equilibrium.

The following table shows certain changes of emphasis as between dramatic [Aristotelian] theatre and Epic theatre:¹⁹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRAMATIC THEATRE</th>
<th>EPIC THEATRE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plot implicates the spectator in a stage situation</td>
<td>narrative turns the spectator into an observer, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wears down his capacity for action</td>
<td>arouses his capacity for action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provides him with sensations</td>
<td>forces him to take decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>picture of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the spectator is involved in something</td>
<td>he is made to face something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggestion</td>
<td>argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instinctive feelings are preserved</td>
<td>brought to the point of recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience</td>
<td>the spectator stands outside it, studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the human being is taken for granted</td>
<td>the human being is the object of the inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he is unalterable</td>
<td>he is alterable and able to alter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eyes on the finish</td>
<td>eyes on the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one scene makes another growth</td>
<td>each scene for itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linear development</td>
<td>montage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evolutionary determinism</td>
<td>in curves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man as a fixed point</td>
<td>jumps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thought determines being</td>
<td>man as a process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling</td>
<td>social being determines thought</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Epic theatre must thus defamiliarize. It must make way for a perception of the present as though it were the past, making incidents appear strange. Thus, the suitable material for the Epic theatre is a known story, so that the effect is unsensational. Even while narrating a new story the playwright and the director must make sure to focus attention not on what happens but on why and how it happens. Therefore, Epic theatre develops techniques through which a critical distance may be

¹⁹ Brecht op cit. 37. In his notes Brecht mentions: This table does not show absolute antithesis but mere shifts of accent. In a communication of fact, for instance, we may choose whether to stress the element of emotional suggestion or that plain rational argument.
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inserted between the spectator and the action.\textsuperscript{20} As in a novel the audience should be able to ‘turn pages’ to check back on the previous scenes, or as in an essay should be able to look for any additional information through footnotes – ‘the idea is that the spectator should be put in a position where he can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave’.\textsuperscript{21} Brecht developed two techniques to create this critical distance – Alienation and Gesture.

Alienation removes the sense of familiarity to social reality – if in the Aristotelian form the spectator was made to respond with ‘I thought it’, in the Epic theatre the response would be ‘I never thought it’. Alienation astonishes the spectator with new views of an old reality. It is through this astonishment that interest is generated in the spectator who is then aroused to discover new truths about an old reality. To achieve this Alienation effect the Epic theatre restores the Fourth wall, where both the spectators and the performers are never allowed to forget the fact that they are witnessing a performance. That the action of the performance will continue and be concluded beyond the stage in the real world, with real actors – the spectators. Thus the action of the Epic stage is a narrative, and very often narratorial character is used. The Alienation effect is produced by songs, films, projections, placards and the chorus which punctuate the action. Songs play an important role in Brecht’s plays. They comment on the action, draw the spectator’s attention to certain aspects of the situation and certain choices being faced by the character(s). A separate singer or chorus is not used for the songs. The actors break free from their characters to sing. Thus, when an actor sings (s)he undergoes a change of function. It takes a greater talent on the part of the actor to perform in such a punctuated form as demanded by the Epic stage. Every aspect of the performance should be transparent so as to constantly remind the spectator that it is a performance. The production of the play should not be a mystery so as to create a false ‘aura’ around its creators – the stage should be presented as a factory, with its machinery fully exposed – the orchestra should not be relegated to the pit but stand in full view. As Brecht explained, these mechanisms were ‘not set out to help the spectator but to block him; they prevent his complete empathy, interrupt his being automatically carried away’.\textsuperscript{22}

The Alienation effect operates along with the Gesture. Gesture is not merely an emphatic movement of limbs and expressions, but a physical gesticulation fused with a social attitude. It conveys a sense of the attitudes that a character adopts when interacting with others.\textsuperscript{23} The capturing of the

\textsuperscript{20} We need to note that this is a ‘critical distance’. In bourgeois theatre the lack of the critical distance disables the spectator to intervene in the action with their interpretation. So though the audience is ‘close’ enough to identify with the action it is ‘far’ from the production of the action. In Brechtian theatre the opposite is true.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 86.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 58.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 104.
Gesture depends on interruptions of the action. The more frequently a person engaged in action is interrupted the more the gestures that can be obtained. However, not all Gests are Social Gests, i.e., not all Gests are prototypes of certain identifiable elements of the society. The attitude of chasing away a fly may not be a Social Gest, but the attitude of a policeman receiving a bribe is. Social Gests allow the spectator to analyze a character and draw conclusions about her/his social circumstances. Characterization in Brecht is always relative. They are not judged on the basis of a Good/Evil parameter. He being a realist many of his hero(in)es are negative, for the parameters of Good and Evil are redrawn in the shift from a bourgeois value system to a proletarian value system.

In his theatre – the Volksbuhne – Erwin Piscator experimented with the techniques of Epic Theatre. The Piscatorbuhne treated the audience as a collective entity. There was no such thing as a late comer and the audience which would smoke and drink throughout the play would express their opinion loudly in the middle of the action for all to hear.

While discussing his theatre techniques Brecht made it absolutely clear that Epic theatre was not a prescription but an experiment:

So is this style of production the new style; is it a complete and comprehensible technique, the final result of every experiment? Answer: no. It is a way, the one that we have followed. The effort must be continued.24

Yet Brecht has been used ahistorically. Other than certain Marxist practitioners who have tried to follow Brecht to the letter without following the ideology behind the techniques, Brecht has been used by bourgeois practitioners and anti-Marxists. Utpal Dutt expresses an astonishment at those who perform both Ionesco and Brecht25. Dutt declares that to produce a Brecht play with truthful treatment of its politics it is necessary to study Marxism-Leninism. Or else, there would be those who perform Brecht’s plays censoring out the Red Flag and all references to it.26 Safdar Hashmi, however, utilized Brecht in his own dramatic practice through Brecht’s philosophy and not through his techniques – I am more of a Brechtian. I’d rather appeal to the people with reasonable arguments and make them reflect what is going on.27

Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed

A compatriot of the revolutionary educationist Paulo Friere, the Brazilian Augusto Boal utilized Friere’s theories, as espoused in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, to formulate the theories of

24 Ibid. 135.
26 Ibid. 276-77.
Idiom for Change

the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. Boal used his Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to educate and mobilize the masses towards greater political freedom. Because of his efforts he fell out of favour with the military dictatorship. In 1971, shortly after the publication of his book The Theatre of the Oppressed, he was arrested and tortured. He managed to flee to Argentina and then to Europe where he remained in exile for over a decade. Other than teaching and touring with his Theatre of the Oppressed techniques and the Arena Theatre, Boal has continued to be closely involved in his country’s politics and been associated with the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT).

The Theatre of the Oppressed (TOP) seeks to use drama as medium of mass political education. It is more of a facilitation whereby the people can learn from their own experiences. Non-Aristotelian and Brechtian in origin, the TOP uses community based theatre squads to work intensively among the urban and rural poor. The TOP has two aspects – the workshop and the performance. When a leading group chooses to or is invited to work in a particular community, it first conducts a week long or a month long workshop. The aim of this workshop is not merely to train the members of the community for theatre, it is also to enable them to gain confidence in themselves and to provide them with a form in which they can express their problems, analyze them and look for solutions. In the process the new actors also rehearse and put together a play based on some problem faced by their community.

On the performance aspect, the TOP can take different forms. The most prevalently used form is the Forum Theatre. In the Forum Theatre technique, a play is generally one which portrays a situation of oppression in which the victim attempts unsuccessfully to fight the oppression. The performers perform a play once before a particular audience. The group then commences a second performance of the play. This time the ‘Joker’ – a narrator figure who conducts the interactive portion of the performance – steps in and asks a member of the audience to suggest what should a particular character, which could be both oppressor and oppressed do. The intervening member of the audience is asked to give her/his suggestions by enacting it in the play, with the other actors playing along their roles. Since, in this form of theatre the spectator cannot remain passive and has to intervene in the performance through action, Boal terms the audience of the TOP as the ‘Spectactor’. Of course, solutions to the problems cannot be easy to find, for the performers have a alternative rehearsed for every situation. At any point, at the instance of the audience, the particular character explains her/his position from within the character’s consciousness. In this way the performers and the spectactors try to understand and confront their reality and look for possible solutions. The same play can be repeatedly performed before a particular community for greater exploration of ideas.
Another important component of Boal's TOP is the Invisible Theatre. This is a technique where the performer performs a rehearsed show in a non-rehearsed space, such as a shopping mall, a city bus, a restaurant, without the audience being aware of the performance. The action is usually a staged dialogue on a particular issue which is designed to trigger off a discussion among the 'audience'. The success of this form of theatre lies in its 'invisibility'. The TOP also uses a variation of the Forum Theatre technique as Legislative Theatre where a community can discuss a matter for legislation and suggest necessary alterations in the law.

A primary motive of Boal's TOP techniques is to fight what he terms the 'cop-in-head', by which he means the inability of the people from taking political actions for they are restricted by their own consciousness. The real policeman is headquartered in their heads and the TOP techniques help them rid the 'cop-in-the-head'.

The Theatre of the Oppressed techniques have been used worldwide to develop consciousness on a wide range of issues. There are Theatre of the Oppressed networks in many countries across the globe. But like Brechtian Epic theatre, Boal's techniques have been hijacked off their politics for a large part of these networks. Much of the TOP network is run by international funding agencies and do not seek to work towards any fundamental transformation of power relations in their societies, rather they have a reformist agenda. The unit of their work is the community and not the nation, for they do not have any essential anti-imperialist perspective. Needless to say, the reason for this is that they are funded by imperialist agencies. There is a need to recover the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to the revolution.

The discussion on the appropriation of Epic theatre and the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques by practitioners of non-committal theatre shows that though a technique may have emerged from a certain politics, a technique is not political by itself. It takes on the politics of its practitioner and its politics have to be maintained by the practitioner. Once again, evidently, art is subordinate to politics!