

*Research Paper—German*



Feb-2010

## On Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre and Dürrenmatt's Theory of Comedy



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I intend here, within the framework of this discourse, as a student of German Language and Literature, to deal with the basic genres of literature and try to go into the basic understanding, appreciation and interpretation of them in the context of German Drama & Theater of twentieth century with special reference to Brecht's epic theater & Dürrenmatt's theater of comedy. In western culture the most basic written literary types include fiction and nonfiction. Poetry, Prose and Drama are the traditional genres of literature. So, let us try to get acquainted with the initial queries on what are prose and drama as literary genres. We skip here a discussion on poetry as a literary genre. A short insight in the Drama would be required here. Greek drama was the earliest form of drama. Performances associated with religious and civic festivals would be termed as tragedies, presenting serious themes. Drama comes from Greek words meaning "to do" or "to act." Drama is not only the written text, but also the theatre performance.<sup>1</sup> M H Abrams states in the Glossary of Literary Terms Drama is the literary form designed for the theatre, where actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated action, and utter the written dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Plays are classified as tragedies or comedies. Comedies end happily. A tragedy is based on historical or mythological plots. If we try to look closely at Friedrich Dürrenmatt's Problems of Theatre, he speaks there of traditional plays, plots of which would have a prehistory. Quoting the

example of Hamlet, he explains that the murder of Hamlet's father is the prehistory, on which the stage play is based. He argues there that the audience of the greek tragedy would know the mythological plot.<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Dürrenmatt

's original essay called Theaterprobleme.

In: Theater: Essays und Reden. Bd

– 24. Werkausgabe in dreißig Bänden.

Diogenes Verlag.

Zürich, 1985. Pp. 34

**Here after quoted in short as Theaterprobleme.**

The tragedy has an unhappy end showing us a downfall of a noble person due to his tragic flaw, a weakness in his own character. Tragedy is the mirror image or negative of comedy. Like comedy, tragedy also supposedly originated as part of a religious ritual—in this case a Dionysian ceremony with dancers dressed as goats or animals (hence tragoedia, literally a "goat-song) pantomiming the suffering or death-rebirth of a god or hero. A true tragedy should evoke pity and fear on the part of the audience, as Aristotle says in his Poetics. According to Aristotle, pity and fear are the natural human response to spectacles of pain and suffering. According to Aristotle a tragedy has got six ingredients: fable, manners, diction, sentiment, spectacle and music. Excerpts from Aristotle's theory of imitation, definition of tragedy in his Poetics can be quoted here<sup>4</sup>:

**... Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a**

**certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.**<sup>5</sup>

Considering tragedy an imitation of human action, Aristotle had given the principle of three unities named as Unity of time, space and of action. More than two thousand years after Aristotle's *Poetics*, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) proposed his own original and highly influential theory of tragedy<sup>6</sup>. Unlike Aristotle, who defines tragedy in terms of specific requirements of plot and character, Hegel defines it as, at bottom, a dynamic contest between two opposing forces—in effect, a collision or conflict of rights. Thus it is not tragic when good defeats bad or when bad defeats good. From Hegel's point of view, the only tragic confrontation is one in which good is up against good and the contest is to the death. Lastly, a type of tragedy a type that originated in ancient Greece, reached its zenith of popularity in Renaissance London, can be mentioned here as Revenge tragedy<sup>7</sup> that dramatizes the predicament of a wronged hero. Examples abound in Greek tragedy *Agamemnon*, *Medea* and *Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus* can be cited as examples of the revenge theme. According to Aristotle ancient comedy originated with the komos, a curious and improbable spectacle in which a company of festive males apparently sang, danced, and cavorted rollickingly around the image of a large phallus. Comedy has involved a high-spirited celebration of human sexuality and the triumph of eros from Aristophanes to Seinfeld. While tragedies occur supposedly on the battlefield or in a palace's great hall; bedroom or bathroom are understood to be places, where comedies occur. As a reaction to the popular forms of theatre till the mid of 20<sup>th</sup> century, arose the movement of Epic theatre from the theories of theatre practitioners like Erwin Piscator, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and

of course, most prominently of Bertolt Brecht. During his search for a new theater form, he was influenced by the work of Erwin Piscator, an established German director who during the 1920s and 30s was involved in the creation of new theatre forms. Piscator had first used the term epic theatre, which Brecht is often associated with. A mode of acting, called Gestus, is incorporated by Brecht's Epic theatre. Actors serve in Brechtian theatre as narrators and demonstrators. They retell events, and in doing so demonstrate actions and events that assist in the audience's understanding the situation. Brecht wanted his actors to remember always that they are an actor portraying another's emotions, feelings and experiences. The Epic Play, in an episodic form, follows a story often in the form of a fable showing historical events, which is familiar to the audience. Brecht would make the story unsensational by using known material. Brecht's plays consist of a series of lone standing, loosely connected scenes. Scenes were often book ended with musical interludes, captions or gestures. These interludes allowed the audience to reflect critically on what they had just witnessed and prevented feelings of empathy or the illusion of reality. The stage was for him a place for discussion. The audience is presented with a topic of social or political relevance and an opinion or message on said topic. The epic theatre actively encourages the audience to think, determine and act. The audience is presented with a topic of social or political relevance and an opinion or message on said topic. Epic theatre is often looked down upon as lacking in emotion or entertainment value, Brecht would always want a theatrical experience that entertained, educated and provoked thought through intelligent humour, dance, music, clowning and colour to tell stories with high political and social content.

Whether one can depict the world in the theatre, is a question, that concerns Friedrich Dürrenmatt.<sup>8</sup> According to Brecht, the world can be depicted in theatre, if its potentiality to change is accepted.<sup>9</sup> Even the subtitle of his book

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

**Writings on theater** [Schriften zum Theater] reads as *on the non<sup>10</sup> Aristotelian drama*.<sup>11</sup> Brecht was famous for his non Aristotelian dramaturgical concept. The name Epic theatre is due to the description and reporting, its use of chorus and projection as means of commentary. The epic theatre wants the audience constantly to be aware of the fact that it is confronted with a stage performance and get rid of illusions. Brecht gives in his theoretical writings clear distinctions between the dramatic and epic forms of theatre, which we would like to give here below.

The principle of Alienation or as it is said in German *Verfremdungseffekt*, as a main core of Brecht's epic theatre, has its roots in the Russian Formalist notion of the device of making strange. It is the essence of all art, as Viktor Shklovsky claims. Inspired by a performance of Mei Lanfang's company in Moscow in the spring of 1935, Brecht coined the German term to label an approach to theater that discouraged involving the audience in an illusory narrative world and in the emotions of the characters. The proper English translation of *Verfremdungseffekt* is a matter of controversy. The word is sometimes rendered as defamiliarization effect, estrangement effect, distantiating, alienation effect, or distancing effect. *Verfremdungseffekt* is also commonly translated as alienation effect. Though this is not a direct

translation, as the German word *Verfremdungseffekt* does not have a literal English equivalent. Its closest literal translation into English, making (the familiar) strange, signifies estrangement, or alienation from the familiar.

In German, *Verfremdungseffekt* signifies both alienation and distancing in a theatrical context; thus, "theatrical alienation" and "theatrical distancing".

Tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility. In the punch-and-Judy-show kind of century of ours, with the black sliding of the white race, no one is particularly guilty, and there are no responsible persons. The argument (proffed) is 'it has always been so, we could not help it, no doubt, the sweep of events sooner or later catch up more or less a number of people some where along its course. We are collectively guilty, bogged down in the sins of our fathers and forefathers, we are the offspring of our children. That is our misfortune and not our guilt. Personal guilt can exist as a personal or religious deed. Comedy is suited to us best. Our world has simultaneously led to atom bomb and to the grotesque, but then that is the only manner or tangible expression and a physical perception of the faceless, the formless, paradox is impertinent in our modern thought and art; it is as if we exist

because the bomb exists. Pure tragedy may not exist but the tragic does; tragic may be released through the comic. We can express it through a fearful moment or a sudden appearance of an abyss. Many of the Shakespearean tragedies are comedies expressing the tragic.<sup>12</sup>

Although at the very beginning of his *Problems of Theater* Dürrenmatt defines himself as a playwright who is not a “representative of any particular movement in the theater, or any particular dramatic technique”<sup>13</sup>, he has drafted a unique theory of the theatre of comedy, which is, as Jan Knopf points out, one of the important documents in the field of theories of theatre of the twentieth century after Brecht’s theory of epic theatre.<sup>14</sup> He is not “an existentialist, a nihilist, an expressionist, or an ironist, or whatever labels get stuck on the jars in which literary critics keep their preserves.”<sup>15</sup> For Dürrenmatt, the stage is “not a field for theories” but rather “an instrument.”<sup>16</sup>

He criticizes contemporary theatrical performance for being in large part a museum in which past plays are displayed, with actors functioning as “civil servants.” He also speaks in passing about some of his own plays and the problems he saw them posing as they were being written. Dürrenmatt perceives the world as a chaos, as a labyrinth. Elisabeth Bauer has correctly said in her doctoral thesis that the image of labyrinth is the only persistent image, around which his thoughts and imaginations are surrounded.<sup>17</sup> Dürrenmatt’s theater does not offer a mirror image of the world as such – that would mean imitation in Aristotelian sense – Jan Knopf uses here apt German adjectives to depict Dürrenmatt’s intentions, in Knopf’s words, he makes audiences confront with the contemporary eccentric, deterring, horrifying and provoking model of the reality<sup>18</sup>.

## REFERENCE

1. As Platz-Waury, Elke explains in the book *Drama and Theater – eine Einführung*. Gunter Narr Verlag. Tübingen, 1980. Pp. 11 2 Platz- Waury quotes in her book from M H Abram ’s Glossary of Literary Terms. Ibid. 4 <http://www.identitytheory.com/etexts/poetics.html> 5 Refer to the site <http://www.identitytheory.com/etexts/poetics.html> 6 Ibid. 7 Ibid. 8 Friedrich Dürrenmatt ’s original essay called *Theaterprobleme*. In: *Theater: Essays und Reden*. Bd – 24. Werkausgabe in dreißig Bänden. Diogenes Verlag. Zürich, 1985. Pp. 30 – 72. **Here after quoted in short as Theaterprobleme**. 9 Bertolt Brecht: *Schriften zum Theater – über eine nichtaristotelische Dramatik*. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt (Main), 1981. Pp. 7-9. 10 Original German wording eine nicht aristotelische Dramatik can be translated as >non< or >anti< Aristotelian drama in English 11 Ibid. 12 This translation of the quotation from Dürrenmatt ’s essay **Theaterprobleme** is done by Adolf Klarman in his book **Modern Drama – Essays in Criticism**. Oxford University Press. London, 1977. It goes with out saying, that Klarmann used Dürrenmatt ’s essay in German, published by Arche Verlag, Zürich, that time in the book **Theater – Schriften und Reden** . Which is now no more available. Even Adolf Klarmann ’s book published in 1977 is now not traceable. I had used this English translation of the original German Quotation in 1985, when I had published my maiden paper on Dürrenmatt entitled **Comedy: A weapon against the social establishment – A review of Dürrenmatt ’s Comedy >The Breakdown<** In: *Journal of the Deptt. of Modern European Languages*, Vol. II, No. 1-2 from Delhi University in March-September, 1985, (Pp. 133-136). A very famous essay **Theaterprobleme** written in 1954-55 by Dürrenmatt, is there in his book named **Theater – Essays und Reden** containing his theoretical writings. This forty one pages long essay is recognized as a statement of his dramaturgical ideas. Diogenes from Zürich published new editions and new versions of Dürrenmatt ’s theoretical writings, plays, novels etc in 1980 in thirty volumes. In all my papers, M.A. & M.Phil dissertations, PhD-thesis, I have used his works in thirty volumes published by Diogenes in Zürich in 1980. 13 *Theaterprobleme*. Pp. 31. 14 *Uns kommt nur noch die Komödie bei – Die politische Begründung der Theatertheorie und ihre Konsequenzen*. In: Jan Knopf: *Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Autorenbücher -3* C H Beck Verlag. Munich, 1980. Pp. 81. 15 *Theaterprobleme*. Pp. 31. 16 *Theaterprobleme*. Pp. 32. 17 The original work, which I am referring here to, is **Die Gerichtsthematik im Werk von Friedrich Dürrenmatt** . Reihe – Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften – Bd. 28. tuduv – Studienverlagsgesellschaft. München, 1990. Pp. 19. 18 Jan Knopf writes in **Uns kommt nur noch die Komödie bei – Die politische Begründung der Theatertheorie und ihre Konsequenzen** >Es kommt Dürrenmatt nicht auf das direkte Abbildan, er will nicht Nachahmungim traditionellen Sinn bieten, vielmehr versucht er, die Zuschauer aufdem Theater mit der Wirklichkeit ihrer Zeit zu konfrontieren, indem er ihnen grotske Spiele anbietet, verschrobene (eccentric), abschreckende (detering), aufschreckende (horrifying), anstoßende und anrempelnde (provoking)Modelle der Wirklichkeit, ... < . In: Jan Knopf: *Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Autorenbücher -3* C H Beck Verlag. Munich, 1980. Pp. 82.