

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

*An International Journal in English*

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

*Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite*

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## **Revisiting Limits: Theatre, Genre and Performance in Meyerhold and Brecht**

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**Article History:** Submitted-05/04/2017, Revised-18/04/2017, Accepted-24/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

### **Abstract:**

The term ‘performance’ may mean a lot of things at the same time. When viewed in conjunction with the theatre, interesting issues emerge, that, as I would argue, are also instances of performance’s continuous engagement with the genre. This brief paper is an attempt to take a critical look at Western theatre’s exchange with the genre—its constant endeavour to ‘revisit’ genre, extend and defer the generic status quo, in its continual experimentation with and extension of the space of the theatre.

This paper would emphasize on two of the stalwarts of European theatre around the world wars at the moment of western theatre’s break with Aristotelian, mimetic, illusionistic theatre, namely Meyerhold and Brecht and show how their visions for the theatre were challenging and restructuring conventional notions of the theatrical genre. It is also interesting to observe how such genre paradigms continue to influence contemporary theatre and performance in various forms.

**Keywords: Genre Theory, Theatre and Performance, Theatre of Grotesque, Epic Theatre**

The word performance may mean a lot of things at the same time. A quick look at the etymological origins of performance shows a consistent addition of meanings with the passage of time and any contemporary dictionary entry on performance points to an array of possible meanings. The Encarta online dictionary, for example lists seven different meanings of the word that range from artistic presentation, accomplishments, effectiveness and linguistic productions. Beyond aesthetic realms, ‘performance’ is an important dictum in sales and marketing theory, management, applied sciences and everyday life (we have responsibilities to ‘perform’). While this brief study would restrict itself to the sense of performance when viewed in conjunction with theatre and to a broader sense of cultural performances, the array of possible meanings of the word performance suggests the multiplicity of performance contexts in a contemporary culture. Moreover, even within a particular context, say of cultural performances, it may have a very different set of meanings and effects. With a focus on theatre studies, this brief

paper is an attempt to explore the interactions between genre and performance in a twentieth century western context.

Before proceeding on to the body of the argument, it would be relevant to take a look at certain key terms in connection with the thesis. Terms like drama, theatre and performance are often, even in academia, used interchangeably and rather arbitrarily and should be addressed at the onset. Drama may again mean many things but in the context of dramatic literature, it refers to a written play-text that can be staged. Theatre, deriving from the Greek *theatron*, on the other hand may mean the playhouse where the written play text or drama is put to life, i.e performed but it might also refer to the discipline of studying dramas in its performance contexts. Performance, even in the sense I am using it in this paper, greatly extends the limits of drama/theatre with elements of ritual, related arts and body. Such basic distinctions, instead of fixing their meanings point to their rather fraught interdependence, and its interrelationship in the realm of theatre studies is constantly being explored by academics. In *Drama/Theatre/Performance*, Simon Shepard and Mick Wallis quote R.W. Vince, who, in 1989 was suggesting that there are four major concerns in contemporary theatre history:

1. the relationship of theatre history to the study of dramatic literature,
2. the relationship of theatre history to theatre practice, 3. the nature and scope of theatre history as an academic discipline, and 4. the relationship of data and historian (Shepard 42).

Vince, through his four-point suggestion was identifying the proper premise of a contemporary theatre studies and its distinctions from scholarly interpretations of dramatic literature. This shift on emphasis from the dramatic and written text to the more dynamic performance text however, was not new and had been happening from the early twentieth century in various forms to which we shall return later. Again roughly in the 1990s performance as a key theoretical and practical term was replacing drama and theatre, or for some theorists, was already displacing drama/theatre. It is hence evident that these key terms refer back and forth to each other and any study of performance must historically situate the performance contexts.

Since the other focus of this work is genre, I would address the term in a theatrical context. The word 'genre' comes from the French word for 'kind' or 'class' and involves categorization of a work of art. Genre theorists from the ancient times have been debating over issues of classification and even the contemporary genre theorists have been split on terms of classification, which could be thematic, stylistic, ideological or rhetorical. Critics have also recognized the problem of defining a genre since, as Daniel Chandler rightly notes,

There are no undisputed ‘maps’ of the system of genres within any medium ...there is often considerable theoretical disagreement about the definition of specific genres. ‘A genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world,’ notes Jane Feuer (1992, 144). One theorist’s *genre* may be another’s *sub-genre* or even super-genre (and indeed what is technique, style, mode, formula or thematic grouping to one may be treated as a genre by another (Chandler 1).

While discussing genre in film theory, Robert Stam points to four problems in labeling, namely:

...*extension* (the breadth or narrowness of labels); *normativism* (having preconceived ideas of criteria for genre membership); *monolithic* definitions (as if an item belonged to only one genre); *biologism* (a kind of essentialism in which genres are seen as evolving through a standardized life cycle) (quoted in Chandler 2).

Historically however, there has been a strong tradition of classification (there has also been an equally strong effort at resisting categorizations) and an important direction is provided by Gerard Genette. In his influential study, *The Architext*, Gerard Genette attempts a critique of Plato and Aristotle’s taxonomical classification of genre. Developing upon Plato’s mimetic genres, drama, dithyramb and epic and Aristotle’s system of four classical genres: tragedy, epic, comedy and parody, Genette introduced a tripartite system—lyrical, epical and dramatic, the system was to “dominate all the literary theory of German romanticism” (Genette 38). However there have been numerous attempts to redefine and extend the taxonomy of genre after Genette and recent genre theorists like Katie Wales and John Hartley point to the intertextuality of genre in an ever-expanding field.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of theatre, the genealogy of genre is a fascinating field of study. The generic classification of drama, as offered by Plato and revised by Aristotle as the classical mimetic illusionistic school in western academics reigned in dramatic circles for centuries. But the moment of breaking away from illusion came with the twentieth century and as I would argue, this was also the moment of theatre’s revisiting of and restructuring of age-old generic notions about drama. With the twentieth century, old conventions were rejected and the new avant-garde, experimental theatre was being prepared to create fresh idioms for the theatre. It must be pointed out here that though this avant-garde theatre broke free from traditional genres, the genre was not dismissed altogether, rather they were relocated, and fresher realms of engagement with the form of the theatre emerged. Classifications continued but the sheer number of theatre genres that emerged within the space of a few decades in the twentieth century soon outnumbered

past phenomena, indicating an activity in the theatre that can best be seen as its engagements in revisiting and extending the limits and boundaries of theatrical genres.

As studies in point, I would take up two key theorists and practitioners of European theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century—Meyerhold and Brecht. They have been path breaking theatre thinkers and are each responsible for coming up with new ideas for doing theatre through a new genre and in this sense have been extremely influential on a future theatre. It must also be pointed out here that understandably there's much more to twentieth century experimental European theatre beyond the two figures that this work picks up but a comprehensive analysis of all such figures and factors is not the purpose of this paper.

## **THEATRE OF GROTESQUE**

Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874—1940) was perhaps the first and among the greatest theatrical innovators of the twentieth century. Born in Russia in the most tumultuous of times, Meyerhold's life literally went through the best and worst of Russia's politics. Meyerhold's career in the theatre began as a student at the MAT (Moscow Art Theatre) under the guidance of Vladimir Danchenko but by 1902 he was already directing plays. He left MAT to tour the provinces with his own Society of New Drama during which he developed a penchant for symbolism. Meyerhold was invited back to the MAT by Stanislavski, where he got an opportunity to freely experiment with theatre techniques at the Studio. During 1906-1907 Meyerhold worked at the St. Petersburg with Vera Komissarzhevskaya theatre in memorable productions of Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice* and Blok's *The Fair Ground Booth*. Already in 1907, Meyerhold had brought out his *Theatre: History and Techniques*, often considered to be the first study on performance theory. In 1913 came out Meyerhold's *On Theatre*, a theoretical approach to 'conditional theatre'. Also during this time Meyerhold was experimenting with classics, the genre of *commedia dell' Art* in a renewed experimental practice. Especially notable is Meyerhold's production of Moliere's *Don Juan* "by which in November, 1910, Meyerhold introduced a new tradition in state theatres" (Sayler 202). Analyzing the *Don Juan* production, Sayler comments:

Similar to the arena of a circus, pressed on all sides by a ring of spectators, the forestage is brought near the public, so that not one gesture, not one movement, not one glimpse of the actor should be lost in the dust of the back stage....Further, concerning the illuminated auditorium, Meyerhold writes: "It is unnecessary to immerse the hall in darkness either during the intermissions or during the course of the action. Bright light infects the playgoers with a festal mood. When the actor sees the smile on the lips of the spectator he begins to admire himself as if before a mirror" (203).

While such production notes emphasize Meyerhold's instinct for the theatrical, historically they can be read as European theatre's independent steps towards an anti-illusionistic theatre genre and in its rudimentary forms, the journey towards Brecht.

With the revolution, Meyerhold threw himself enthusiastically to the Bolshevik cause and in 1918 directed Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*. Indeed the Mayakovsky-Meyerhold combine was one of the most creative periods in Russian arts and Myakovsky probably wrote *The Bed Bug* (1929) exclusively for Meyerhold. During 1918-1919, as the co-head of the 'Commisariat of Education and Enlightenment', Meyerhold sought to radicalize Russian theatre, revising traditional genres. In 1922, he founded his own studio theatre, known as *The Meyerhold Theatre*. It was during his work at *The Meyerhold Theatre* that Meyerhold developed his conception of biomechanics which might be read as a generic approach to Constructivism that featured "abstract, intensely dynamic, anti-realistic and non-representational action, aimed at creating an 'independent reality' on stage."<sup>2</sup> In the late twenties Meyerhold's work increasingly focused on the 'tragic-grotesque', especially in the famous production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, "one of the most complicated philosophic and apocalyptic phantasmagorias in the European arts of the 20th century, similar to the painting of Picasso or Dali..."<sup>3</sup> what Meyerhold was to later call as a 'Theatre of Grotesque'.

Meyerhold was arrested by Stalin's police in 1939 for his supposed formalist art and was executed the next year putting an end to a tragic series of misunderstanding of an art and life that was radical beyond its times. In a memorable letter to Molotov, Meyerhold recounted his prison experience:

The investigators began to use force on me, a sick 65-year-old man. I was made to lie face down and beaten on the soles of my feet and my spine with a rubber strap... For the next few days, when those parts of my legs were covered with extensive internal hemorrhaging, they again beat the red-blue-and-yellow bruises with the strap and the pain was so intense that it felt as if boiling water was being poured on these sensitive areas. I howled and wept from the pain... (Meyerhold, Wikipedia).

Shunned not only by critics but also by some of his friends and the failure of the Studio Theatre experiment, Meyerhold nevertheless continually explored possibilities of the stage and evolved his notion of a 'Theatre of Grotesque', a highly stylized performance form. This was intricately linked to his concept of the biomechanics and constructivism and was his contribution to the generic reorganization of modern theatre. Developing his theories at a time when European drama was being dominated by the traditions and genres of realism and naturalism, Meyerhold called for a radical generic reversal. Much

like the American method acting inspired by Stanislavski, Meyerhold's biomechanics was psychophysical emphasizing that gesture and movements could portray specific emotions and that the psychological and physiological processes are closely linked. In fact, Meyerhold,

developed a strictly codified system of choreographic sequences (known as *études*, or "studies") used to express specific emotional and physical scenarios....A Biomechanical *étude* is a miniature storyline made up of three parts - intention, realization, and reaction. Each of these parts, in turn, comprises four stages of movement: *otkas*, *posyl*, *stoika*, and *tormos* (Meyerhold and Biomechanics).

Despite resistances, in the patterns of detailed organization and the visions of a new theatre, Meyerhold was probably the first avant-garde artist to experiment with the style, structure and genre of the modern theatre.

In his visions for a theatre that would have no qualms about expressing that it was, after all, theatre, Meyerhold was already anticipating Brecht. Brecht's active and continuous engagement with the theatre at a crucial moment in world history has been characterized by constant experimentations with the form and content of the theatre which, for him, was a political project as well. It is also with Brecht that Western theatre achieves its break from Aristotelian mimetic theatre and marks the arguably first intervention in classical genre with a fully developed theory for the stage. If Aristotle had distinguished between the genres of 'Epic' and 'drama' claiming the latter to be the stageable mode, Brecht reversed the binary in a rare generic combination of the epic and the drama. What emerged was Brecht's intervention with the theatrical genre through his visionary epic theatre.

## THE EPIC THEATRE

As Brecht pointed out in his 'Notes on the Opera *Mahogany*', 'the modern theatre is the epic theatre.'<sup>4</sup> Brecht was looking for a theatrical idiom that would be an answer to the illusionistic, naturalistic, empathetic theatre that was common during his time. This, according to Brecht was the *petit bourgeois* theatre that encouraged empathy and emotionally tense situations whereby the audience would leave the theatre after watching a play as if in a trance. And for Brecht, an audience lured by the trance, mesmerized by the 'magic' of the actor's performance in an Aristotelian cathartic sense would hardly have their critical faculties open enough so as to be able to evaluate and question the politics underlying social situations. This for Brecht was absolutely necessary. If the theatre had to be made an agent of social change then the audience had to be prepared not only to ask questions of the ways in which art is made available to them but also to judge

social situations for themselves. Brecht's vision for the episodic, estranged, critical, dialectical, non-Aristotelian epic theatre was hence the theatre that empowered audiences instead of putting them in a state of trance. The primary focus of Brechtian epic theatre was the generation of a socially critical and enquiring response and the concept of 'distancing' became central to the epic theatre. This for Brecht was done through the *Verfremdungseffekt*, roughly translated into English as 'Alienation effect' or 'estrangement', an effective device through which an audience could be broken out of their trance, by making startling what seemed obvious, curious what seemed self-evident:

The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware...from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected.... Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation (Willet 143-44).

It must be noted that it was here, through his notions of 'alienation' that Brecht began moving away from the epic theatre of Piscator towards a more unique formulation. Brecht's application of alienation techniques, now world renowned, was through a series of innovative features which was fairly new to the stage during the 1930s. This included projection from films, sub-titles, placards, cartoons, statistics, maps, techniques of montage, neutral lighting and an open stage among others. These innovations also had to do with Brecht's concept of 'literarization' and deliberate interruption of the action. Brecht tried to do to the theatre what was always possible for the book—flipping back pages or looking up a reference. Literarization, through captions, posters etc. in this sense also offered the facility of punctuating representation and hence revealing them in a critical light. Such punctuation and interruption is deliberately sought and forms a necessary part of the episodic structure of the plays. While emphasizing the 'narrative' of his plays Brecht was also conscious to the episodic nature of the scenes. Each episode or scene was framed and separated in such a way that they would stand on their own, but at the same time the 'knotting' between the scenes would be noticeable.

To put it into practice what was required was a set of very differently oriented actors than what the naturalistic stage promoted and this is where Brecht's notion of the 'Gestus' or 'gestic acting' comes in. Differentiated from *geste* or 'gesture', 'Gestus' for Brecht was "...both gist and gesture; an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions" (Willet 42). For Brecht the focus was man, but not so much in individual psychology as in social *gestus*. As Brecht points out,

The "look of a hunted animal" can become a social gest if it is shown that particular manoeuvres by men can degrade the individual man to the level of a

beast; the social gest is the gest relevant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances (Willet 104-05).

Hence the actor donning a role had to convey the character situating himself 'at a distance' both from the character he performed and the situation the character was in and 'demonstrate' the character instead of being swayed away by the part he was playing. To emphasize this, Brecht is famously known to instruct his actors during rehearsals to prefix his/her dialogue with 'he said' or 'she said'. Martin Esslin has pointed to this Brechtian notion of acting as "acting in quotation marks." It is in keeping with the spirit of the epic theatre and it is through literarization, punctuation and gestus that Brecht sought to 'alienate' an audience in order to offer them better opportunities for critical judgment.

For Walter Benjamin, these inroads into a new theory for the theatre promised much. Benjamin probably met Brecht in 1929 and the two great minds of modern German culture closely interacted, corresponded and responded to the rise of Fascism in Germany through the decade. Brecht and Benjamin shared a similar historical vision and the political ideology of Marxism and critics have often drawn parallels of their exchange with the Meyerhold-Mayakovsky combine. Benjamin responded to Brecht's epic theatre in his essay 'What is Epic Theatre?' in which he characteristically analyses Brecht's concept of the epic theatre. Benjamin recognizes that modern theatre needs to reevaluate the relation between the stage and the audience, between the actor and the producer and replace the elevated stage space into a public platform. Benjamin notes:

The functional relationship between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors, remained almost unchanged. Epic theatre takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into these relationships. For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area. For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy. For its *text*, the *performance is no longer a virtuoso interpretation, but its rigorous control*. For its *performance*, the *text is no longer a basis of that performance*, but a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performance are marked. For its *actor*, the *producer no longer gives him instructions about effects, but theses for comment*. For its *producer*, the *actor is no longer a mime who must embody a role, but a functionary who has to make an inventory of it* (Benjamin 2). [italics mine]

I quote this whole passage since this is where Benjamin specifies the areas in which epic theatre has the power to transform given performative conditions and reverse them. It calls for an entirely fresh way of looking at the relation between the stage and the

audience, the text and the performance, the actor and the producer and the theatre as a communicative art form. Working with an active desire for change, Brecht was thus also carefully addressing the question of genre, continuously revising it and liberating the genre from conventional strictures through his own fresh visions.

## **PERFORMATIVE INTERVENTIONS**

Having critically reviewed the works of two stalwarts of the European theatre in genre at the beginning of the twentieth century, I would now take a brief look at the contemporary history of performance studies, which has also been largely generic. As suggested at the beginning of this work, any academic engagement with performance points to multiple possibilities and it is fascinating to observe how drama, theatre and performance extend upon each other in an extremely contrived and dramatic relationship. Although as a discipline, Performance studies has its origins in events roughly in the 1960s, it begins its journey as a proper academic discipline in the 1980s with Richard Schechner and the New York University. For Peggy Phelan, however, the origin story of Performance studies was an intriguing one in which “two men gave birth” (Phelan 3). The other man was of course Victor Turner, and the narrative of the beginning, for Shannon Jackson,

focuses on Schechner’s generative interactions with the anthropologist, Victor Turner, who took the study of performance beyond the proscenium stage and into the carnivals, festivals, protests, and other cultural rituals of an intercultural world....It is also a heroic story of disciplinary breaking and remaking, one framed by the language of the rebel, the renegade, and later, incorporating new schools of critical theory, the subversive and the resistant (8).

Jackson also refers to Schechner’s controversial call for the abolition of theatre departments in the 1992 meeting of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education as a ‘paradigm’ shift arguing that theatre had become ‘the string quartet’ of the new age.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly this is a point in theatre historiography which scholars have often referred to as the ‘performative turn’. With the performative turn, the paradigm shift in humanities and social sciences, ‘performance’ is seen as a wider term beyond a metaphor for theatrical performance and is seen as a mode of understanding everyday social and cultural phenomena. Schechner is at the center of the performative turn; he distinguishes between performances in a traditional sense and extended performances in everyday life and culture through play, games, sports, rituals, social behaviour etc. through two simple words—‘is’ and ‘as’. Elsewhere recognizing that the ‘paradigm’ shift is owing to a ‘dissatisfaction with the *status quo*’ and an ‘explosion of knowledge’ due partly to the rise of the internet, Schechner notes that, “...The world no longer appeared as a book to be read but as a performance to participate in” (19) and that Performance Studies is “a

response to an increasingly performative world” (4). As Simon Shepard and Mick Wallis point out, for Schechner,

While globalisation promotes ‘cultural sameness’ Performance Studies promotes ‘tensions and partialities’. It resists hierarchies of ‘ideas, organisations, or people’ and is ‘sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized’. It works best ‘amidst a dense web of connections’ (Shepherd 105).

The many ramifications of Performance Studies and its multiple contexts in an ever changing world are beyond the scope of this paper. What is interesting to observe is how a common desire to break free from existing conventions link certain key thinkers of the theatre or performance. The theatre artist’s vision has always been shaped by a desire to restructure conventional notions of the theatrical genre, which is evident, historically, in its constant endeavour to negotiate with the structure, form and genre, in its search for fresher languages for the theatre.

In this brief paper, I have tried to show how such explorations in form, content and theory of the theatre have been part of theatre’s age-old engagement with and revisiting of notions of genre, which was also informed by a distinct ideology and politics of its own. Theatre continues to engage with genre as we approach the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century and fresher genres like Cyborg or Digital Theatre, Environmental Theatre and Legislative Theatre, (including the rise of intercultural theatre in the closing decades of the last century) continue to expand the limits of genre.

**Notes:**

1. For Katie Wales, ‘genre is...an intertextual concept’ whereas for John Hartley, genre should be seen as a ‘property of the relations between texts.’ See Wales, Katie. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. London: Longman, 1989. Print. And O’Sullivan, Tim et al. *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
2. See <http://old.meyerhold.ru/en/biography/>
3. See <http://old.meyerhold.ru/en/biography/>
4. The term ‘Epic theatre’ was first used by Piscator. During his days as a dramaturg Brecht was associated with Max Reinhardt and Piscator who were already searching for a new theatrical language for the modern German theatre. Piscator noted that ‘the epic theatre was invented by me primarily in production and by Brecht primarily in the script.’ From the 1930s onwards Brecht began developing his own vision of the Epic Theatre, basing on Piscator’s works.

5. Schechner, Richard. "A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy". *The Drama Review* 36.4 (1992), 7–10.

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