

## Introduction

To use literature as a tool for improving political and social problems seems an impractical approach for some people. However, Brecht's works not only can reveal the problems in his times, but also may provide some clues for us to follow in the future. Bertolt Brecht, an outstanding playwright, was born on February 10, 1898 and died on August 14, 1956. Born in Augsburg, Bavaria, he was raised by a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, a director of a paper company. He studied medicine and worked briefly as a hospital orderly in Munich during World War I. After witnessing many deaths and wounds in the hospital, he turned to literature instead.

He was once a member of the German Communist Party, "even if Brecht could never feel comfortable as a card-carrying party member" (Rosenhaft 12); so it is not difficult to find Marxist ideas in many of his plays. Communism advocates the community ownership of all property. In this dissertation I have consulted the following two books: *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, specifies the idea of "the dictatorship of proletariat", and Peter Singer's *Marx*, first published in 1980, provides a good introduction to Marx's thought as a whole. He sees Marx as a philosopher primarily concerned with human freedom, rather than as an economist or a social scientist, and this book concluded with an assessment of Marx's legacy.

Brecht and his mentor Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) solidified the theories of epic theatre in Berlin from 1924 to 1933. Piscator, between 1924 and 1927, sought to create the "Proletarian Drama" for the working-class audience. In 1927-1928, he perfected many of the techniques later associated with epic theatre. Despite his pioneering work, epic theatre is now associated primarily with Bertolt Brecht as a

major theoretician. Brecht described his ideal theater by using his three key devices: historicization, epic, and alienation (Barranger 594). Different from one of Aristotle's basic assumptions of the classical drama which indicates the audience could produce "catharsis" through "pity and fear", Brecht's device of "alienation" is to insert songs or narrative in certain passages or between some episodes in order to make his audience to see objectively about those problems demonstrated on the stage, and to compare those actually happening in his time, and hopefully he can make a difference in the future.

In order to advance this concept of "alienation" in the epic theatre, the actors should act their characters objectively, and the props and lighting are simplified to make the audience focus more on the event than the visual effect on the stage. Also in Brecht's epic theatre, the protagonists are usually not heroes or heroines, but mostly proletarians, and the villains are often industrial magnates and self-satisfied middle class. To illustrate his epic device, the progressive scenes are used to show the ascending or declining fortunes of the protagonists with no act divisions. As for "historicization", the materials in the history are used to make the audience to reflect upon the oppressive social and political problems of the present time.

In all his plays, I am especially interested in and impressed with the three mothers, about the ways they have survived in depressing situations; namely, Ms. Vlassova in *Mother* daringly participates and struggles in the Bolshevik revolution with her only son, Mother Courage (Ms. Fierling)\* in *Mother Courage and Her Children* tries hard to survive in the war with her children by doing business with the military, and Grusha the maid in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* courageously raises a child not her own and gets legal custody of the child as a reward in the end.

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\* Mother Courage is Ms. Fierling's well-known nickname in the play.

However, there are two things in common with those mothers—first, they are all single mothers without helpful husbands; second, they are all living in poverty and war. All their unusual courage is from their unique maternal instincts. Therefore, the feminist theory in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is applied to interpret how their maternal instincts can be brought out under their unpleasant conditions.

For me, all three Brecht's plays are entertaining, meaningful, and rather touching. Most of all, I find them didactical, because they can urge the audience to be more introspective in order to make life better.

