

ELEMENTS OF THE EPIC THEATRE IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE SANDBOX*

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(Accepted for publication: September 8, 2013)

ABSTRACT

The theory of the epic theatre was promoted in the first half of the twentieth century by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. He believed that the new events of the twentieth century dictate the necessity for new modes of presentation. Being primarily politically and socially concerned, he wanted to make his audience think about the socio-political problems shown on stage, rather than feeling it; thus, he called for the notion of estrangement/alienation or what is often termed the A-effect. The present paper is an attempt to show how Edward Albee employs some of the techniques of the epic theatre in his play *The Sandbox*. The paper is more technically, than thematically, oriented. In many places in this short play, Albee makes the audience feel that they are watching a play=game, not a slice of life as it is claimed by the realist dramatists.

Some of the elements of the epic theatre which are employed in this play are: the actors do not identify with the characters that they play; the author deals with some serious situations in a cartoon-like way; some characters play the role of the author and/or the director; the characters address the audience directly; and mixing tragic and comic events at the same moment.

KEY WORDS: Epic Theatre, Estrangement/Alienation/A-Effect, Traditional Dramatists

Introduction

One of the major characteristics of Modern literature is breaking the traditional absolute rules of writing drama, such as the five acts, the well-made plot, the illusion of reality, the tragic flaw, close-ended plays, the tragic hero, etc. The modern dramatists tried to change these rules and experiment with new styles and modes of presentation. This is because they believed that the new happenings of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century dictate the use of new ways of expressions. Henrik Ibsen, for example, wrote plays in three acts which tackled social problems and he even altered the notion of the noble tragic hero which had been observed since Aristotle. One of the major modern writers who created a completely different type of drama (The Epic Theatre) is the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Being socio-politically driven, Brecht wanted to write plays which could make people aware of their social and political problems by preventing them from emotional identification with characters and situations presented. He believed that, in this way, the audience will be encouraged to think, rather than feel. To him, feeling deprives the audience from understanding their problems and consequently makes them unable to solve such problems. For this purpose, he adopted a number of techniques which he collectively called the defamiliarizing or Alienation effect. The A-effect applies to the

relationship between actors and the characters they play, the characters and the audience, and to the situations as well. The following sections are an attempt to pinpoint the techniques that Albee uses as representative of the epic theatre.

I. Actor-Character Detachment

One of the most important features of the epic theatre is that the actors must not identify with characters they play. Cuddon (1998: 20) says in this regard that "the actors should keep a kind of distance from the parts they are interpreting; they should have *an attitude towards* the characters rather than try to efface themselves within it." Eagleton (1977: 30-31) also states that

The actors, instead of 'identifying' with roles, are instructed to distance themselves from them, to make it clear that they are actors in a theatre rather than individuals in real life. They 'show' the characters they act (and show themselves showing them), rather than 'become' them;

Bottoms (2005) states clearly that "*The Sandbox* is a witty performance of a performance." Thus, crucial to the characteristics of the epic theatre in the play is the deliberate use of the word "Players" (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001) instead of the *Dramatic Personae* or *List of Characters* which is the convention in realistic drama. This use shows that what is

performed on stage is just a "play", i.e., a game; it is not a slice of life, it is merely a game played by some players. Thereby, Albee makes the readers/audience aware that what is going on on stage is not real life and consequently they must not be involved in it emotionally; rather, they must think about the problem shown.

An outstanding example of this notion in the play is that when the time comes for Grandma to die, the author in his stage direction wants to ascertain that the audience must not be sad by identifying with the character of Grandma as her death is shown comically, and, in this way, they may reflect about it. Consider the deliberate use of the verb "plays":

(Grandma *plays dead*. Mommy and Daddy go over to look at her; she is a little more than half buried in the sand; the toy shovel is in her hands, which are crossed on her breast.)[Bolds mine] (Deedari and Mansuri, 597)

Vos (1973) comments on the funeral prepared by Mommy and Daddy for Grandma's death saying that the two actually are not managing a true funeral but rather "have been **playing** funeral; they have not actually taken place in the ritualistic process of dying. Only spectators, they leave with the same indifference and blindness with which they arrived." [Bolds mine]. The funeral is the most important event in the play because the whole play is about Grandma's death and how Mommy and Daddy prepare for her to die; therefore, by presenting it as a child's game, the author defamiliarizes it and makes the audience aware that what they see is really a "play", not reality. The purpose again is to make the audience keep a critical distance from the incidents occurring on stage.

II. Cartoon-like Presentation

Another important feature which renders the play an example of the epic theatre is the cartoon-like way the author deals with some grave situations which, if taken realistically, are of great consequences. Mews states that spectators are encouraged to watch events on stage dispassionately and to reach their own conclusions; Abrams (1999: 6) likewise says that the writer deliberately defamiliarizes events in order to prevent the audience from emotional identification or involvement with the characters; Bennett and Royle (1999: 37) explain

this feature saying that in the epic theatre "the spectator is encouraged to feel dissociated, uneasy, [and] alienated." Perhaps, the best example to begin with is the "sandbox". The sandbox (together with "toy" pail and shovel) which is originally used for children to play with, is here used ironically for a serious matter such as death. Thus, the combination Grandma/Death-Sandbox/Grave is actually a purposeful means the author uses to prevent the audience from having pity for Grandma, because with the sad image of Grandma, there is always simultaneously the cartoon-like image of the sandbox. Another related instance is when it is "supposed" that Grandma is dead, but surprisingly and comically, she is discovered in her sandbox-grave throwing sand over herself with the "toy" shovel:

(The lights come up again, to brightest day; the MUSICIAN begins to play. GRANDMA is discovered, still in the sandbox, lying on her side, propped up on an elbow, half covered, busily shoveling sand over herself.)

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

Grandma comments on her own situation speaking to herself saying, "I don't know how I'm supposed to do anything with this goddam toy shovel ..." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001).

This is one of the many ways through which the writer breaks the illusion of reality claimed by conventional drama.

III. Misrepresented Character

Also related to the idea of the A-effect is the choice of a young man to play the role of the Angel of Death. This is very important in changing the conventional image of the Angel of Death as someone ugly and frightening. This Angel of Death in the play seems very modern as he is in bathing suit, doing physical exercises by raising and lowering his arms which the audience must take for the fluttering of the wings of the angel. He is quite gentle, always smiling and saying "Hi!" to almost everyone of the characters. This choice serves Albee's intention in two ways; first, he provides an entirely different representation of the Angel of Death in literature and secondly, he mixes between the real world offstage and the "play" on stage. Consider, for instance, the following dialogue between Grandma and the Angel of

Death after Mommy and Daddy dump her in the sandbox and sit waiting for her to die:

GRANDMA. Where ya from?

YOUNG MAN. Southern California.

GRANDMA (*nodding*). Figgers; figgers. What's your name, honey?

YOUNG MAN. I don't know ...

GRANDMA. (*to the audience*) Bright, too!

YOUNG MAN. I mean ... I mean they haven't given me one yet ... the studio ...

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

In this succinct dialogue, the writer makes the audience feel for a moment that Grandma interviews the actor who plays the role of the character of the Angel of Death. Significantly, the young man answers honestly that he is from Southern California, a place the audience is quite sure the Angel of Death is **not** from; then, this young man who is acting in the real-time of the dialogue does not know so far his name in the play which makes Grandma have a sideswipe with the audience against him. The young man is so excited that he is given a role in a play, he does not pay attention to the role he plays and this excitement actually partly accounts for his constant smiling, sweet behaviour with and kindness towards the other actors. Consider the following dialogue:

GRANDMA: (*to the Young Man*) You're ... you're an actor, huuh?

YOUNG MAN: (*beaming*) Yes. I am.

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

The stress laid on "yes" by setting it off with a full stop and on "I am" by writing in full form and the use of the adjective, "beaming" show the young man's degree of delightfulness by being called an "actor".

IV. Characters as Director

Another technique the playwright employs to create an epic theatre effect is that many times his characters play the role of author and/or director of the play. The main purpose is to make the audience aware that they are watching a "play", which presents some artificial, not real, incidents. In the example below, Mommy asks the actor behind the wings to come on stage because it is his time; she says:

I know she's my mother. What do you take me for? (*A pause*) All right, now; let's go on with it. (*She shouts into the wings, stage-left*) Yor! Out there! You can come in now.

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

The stage direction which follows provides another example as the musician waits for a signal from Mommy to begin playing music:

(*The MUSICIAN enters, seats himself in the chair, stage-left, places music on the music stand, is to ready to play. MOMMY nods approvingly.*)

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

Mommy who is depicted by the author as a domineering wife does not only control her husband, but she manages the stage as well. It is she who orders the musician to come in on stage and to play music and to stop playing as it is obvious in the examples above and examples such as "You can begin [playing music] now.", and "You can stop now." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001), "You ... uh ... you go ahead and do whatever it is you do." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001), "All right, you can stop now, if you want to. I mean, stay around for a swim, or something; it's all right with us." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001). Another female character who disillusiones the audience by showing the artificiality of what is going on on stage is Grandma. Unexpectedly she reminds the off-stage workers that the stage lights should be turned off to make night; the author says in the stage direction:

(*She [Grandma] looks up at the sky, shouts to someone off stage*) Shouldn't it be getting dark now, dear?

As soon as she reminds them, the lights go out and night comes on. As night descends, it is time for Grandma to die, but in a very comic way she asks the off-stage staff not to turn on the lights because she is not yet ready to **play** dead, "Don't put the lights up yet ... I'm not ready; I'm not quite ready. (*Silence*) All right, dear ... I'm about done." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001). Another important use of such technique is that the characters have knowledge about the play as play, i.e., they talk about the play as if they were outside it; for example, more than once, the audience hear an off-stage rumble which indicates that Grandma's time has come to die.

When Daddy hears such a rumble, he forgets about its meaning; he says, "It [the rumbling] was ... it was ... thunder ... or a wave breaking ... or something." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001), but Mommy reminds him, saying, "It was an off-stage rumbling ... and you **know** what that means ..." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001). When another louder off-stage rumbling is heard, Mommy says, "Ohhhhhhhhhh ... poor Grandma ... poor Grandma ..." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001) because she knows this one means Grandma's death. To the surprise of the audience, Grandma answers Mommy saying, "I'm fine! I'm all right! It [death] hasn't happened yet!" (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001), which means that Grandma, too, knows that the off-stage rumbling means the death of the character of Grandma; Eagleton (1977) says in this respect that the characters in the epic theatre are not ignorant about what comes next in the plot of the play.

V. Addressing the Audience

Another important feature of the epic theatre is addressing the audience directly; this interrupts the action of the play which averts the audience from being engaged in the story and with the characters emotionally, thereby to create the A-effect. More than one time Grandma addresses the audience to comment on other characters and to complain about her suffering and the way her daughter treats her; when she asks the Young man about his name and he says that he does not know, she addresses the audience describing him ironically, "Bright, too!" (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001). When she shouts and cries so as to attract the attention of the people around and gets no reaction, she begins talking to the audience, saying:

Honestly, what a way to treat an old woman!
Drag her out of the house ... stick her in a car ...
bring her out here from the city ... dump her in a
pile of sand ... and leave her here to set. ...
(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

As she speaks to the audience, she orders the Musician to stop playing music because she finds difficulty in making her voice reach the audience, "Will you stop that, please? ... I'm a feeble old woman ... how do you expect anybody to hear me over that peep! peep! peep!" (To herself) There's no respect around here!"

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001). Luere (1994) explains this point:

The switches occur when Albee varies the emotional and/or spatial distance that separates his characters from the audience: His actors address viewers as often as one another. The result is that characters tell strangers in the dark what they can't or won't communicate to their intimates. ... Grandma confines her fears directly across the footlights while her unconcerned daughter sees to a cruelly proper funeral.

VI. Characters Forgetting Their Roles

In more than one place, Albee's characters forget about their roles and speeches. This reminds the audience that they are watching an artificial life not a real one and thus he breaks the illusion of reality which is created by traditional plays. After dumping Grandma in the sandbox, Daddy does not know what the next thing to do is; he asks Mommy, "What do we do now?" (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001); Mommy answers, "What do you mean, what do we do now? We go over there and sit down, of course." (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001). As they go and sit in the chairs waiting for Grandma to die, the following dialogue ensues:

DADDY (*pause*). What do we do now?

MOMMY (*as if remembering*). We ... wait.
We ... sit here ... and we wait ... that's what we do.

(Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

Significantly, the author hints in the stage direction that Mommy has forgotten about their role in the play. Her broken speech which is indicated by the dots shows that she is not quite sure about what she says. In the dialogue to follow, it is seen that the young man, who plays the role of the Angel of Death, forgets his line which he must say and surprisingly asks Grandma to give him a chance so that he might remember it; Grandma, as if she were not in a play restricted by a limited performance time, grants him a chance to remember (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001):

GRANDMA. I ... can't move

YOUNG MAN. Shhhh ... be very still ...

GTANDMA. I ... can't move ...

YOUNG MAN. Uh ... ma'am; I ... **have a line here.**

GRANDMA. Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie; you go right ahead.

YOUNG MAN. I am ... uh ...

GRANDMA. **Take your time**, dear.

YOUNG MAN. (*prepares; delivers the line like a real amateur*). I am the Angel of Death. I am ... uh ... I **am come** for you.

[Bolds mine] (Deedari and Mansuri, 2001)

The author, very cleverly, at the time of the death of Grandma, which is a moment ought to make the audience sad, creates a comic situation that makes the audience forget about her death and concentrate on this funny unprofessional young actor who forgets his line and when he prepares himself, he delivers it wrongly saying "I am come", instead of "I have come". This is a sign that he does not remember his exact words. In this way, the author interrupts the action of the play and awakens the audience from their illusion of reality.

Conclusion

Through the examples explained above, it is obvious that Albee uses some of the techniques of the epic theatre advanced by Brecht. The purpose is mostly to prevent the audience from emotional identification with the characters and to make them think about the issues presented on stage instead. Thus, the epic theatre is a reaction against the illusion of reality created by realistic drama. According, Albee's *The Sandbox*, which contains many of the elements of the epic theatre, can be considered a representative example of the above mentioned theory.

Note: All parenthetical references to *The Sandbox* are to Deedari, Reza and Mansuri, Mozghan (2001). *Understanding Drama* [Pp. 590-599]. Tehran: Rahnama.

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الخلاصة

إن نظرية المسرح الملحمي قد طُورت في النصف الأول من قرن العشرين من قبل الكاتب الألماني بيرتولت بريخت. كان بريخت يعتقد بان الأحداث الجديدة في القرن العشرين تتطلب أشكال و أساليب تعبيرية جديدة تناسب و روح العصر. كان يريد أن يجعل الجمهور يفكر في المسائل السياسية و الإجتماعية التي تُعرض على خشبة المسرح بدلا من أن ينسجم معها وجدانيا. و هكذا كان يدعو إلى فكرة الإغتراب أو التباعد المكاني و العاطفي بين الجمهور و الشخصوس المسرحية من جانب، و من جانب آخر بين الممثلين و الأدوار التي يؤدونها. هذا البحث يحاول تناول كيفية إستغلال إدوارد آلي لتقنيات المسرح الملحمي في مسرحية حوض الرمل. البحث يركز على الجانب التقني أكثر من الجانب المعنوي. إن آلي، في كثير من الأحيان في المسرحية، يجعل الجمهور يعتقد بأن ما يراه على المسرح ليس جزءا من الحياة الواقعية كما كان يدعي الكتاب الواقعيون، و إنما هو لعبة. و بهذا فهو يحطم وهم الواقع الذي يخلقه المسرح الواقعي.

پوخته

تيۆرى شانۆي داستاني له نيوى يه كه ميبى سه دهى بيسته مدا له لايهن شانۆنوسى ئەلمانى بيرتۆلت بريخته وه پهرى پيدرا. بريخت پي و ابو كه رووداوه تازە كانى سه دهى بيسته م پيوستيان به شيوه و شيوازي گوزارشتي تازە ههيه. له بهر ئەوهى به پلهى يه كه م بايه خه كانى بريخت راميارى و كۆمه لايه تىي بوون، ئەوا دهيوست وا له بينه رانى شانۆ بكات بير له رووداوه كان بكه نه وه له بيرى ئەوهى له رووى ههست و سۆزه وه ته ماهيان له گه لدا بكه ن. هه ر بۆيه بانه گه شهى بۆ بيرۆكهى نامۆ كردن ياخود نيشاندانى باو وهك ناباو و ناباو وهك باو ده كرد. ئەم تويژينه وهيه هه وليكه بۆ خستنه رووى چه ند ره گه زيكي ئەم تيۆرييه له شانۆي سه ندووقى لم ي شانۆنوس ئيدوارد ئالى. تويژينه وه كه پتر لايه نى ته كنيكي له خوگر تووه زياتر له لايه نى فيكري. له زۆر شويني ئەم شانۆيه دا، ئالى وا له بينه ر ده كات وا ههست بكه ن كه ته ماشاي گه مه يهك ده كه ن، نهك به شيك له ژيانى واقيعى وهك چۆن له شانۆيه واقيعيه كاندا ههيه.