

## Brecht and "dumbing down"

"Complex seeing must be practised-----Thinking above the flow of the play is more important than thinking from within the flow of the play."

**Brecht, quoted by Raymond Williams**

**in "Drama from Ibsen to Brecht"**

We wanted our audiences to *think* about the problems in schools and not just *feel* the emotions generated by our story. So, Brecht's comment is relevant to our purpose. We had particular problems with devising the ending to the play because the scene of Phil's departure is obviously sad and the audience could be left with lumps in their throats, but nothing else. We wanted to turn away from sentiment at the last moment and remind the audience that this story reflected a problem in all schools and we expressed this with the banners - an idea that came to us very late and after a lot of different bits of music had been tried out to provide the right sort of feeling for the ending.

So the play is in many ways didactic. The alienating devices of talking to the audience, suddenly using song and creating a montage of scenes rather than a straight narrative line - all these things suggest Brecht, although we were not thinking of him while we were creating the piece. One example of montage occurs near the beginning of the second half. The idea is inspired by film, just as it was for Brecht:

**Headmaster:** (*In assembly*) Now, following our assemblies on Sacrifice, Commitment and Fear, I want to talk about Rebellion. Rebellion is just a defect of the brain. It is a stage one passes through. What you people are passing through. The adolescent brain, scientists now tell us, is "...an explosive package..."

A begins to walk backwards out of the scene. Phil & Roberta pick up mugs and move in front of him and start next scene. It is a theatrical dissolve. The house lights fade.

**Headmaster:** (Fading as he walks backwards and the other two come downstage.) Things happening to the brain and hormones discombobulate young people...

Staff room argument between Phil and Roberta fades up. It cuts across the Headmaster's last words.

**Phil:** (*Fading up*) All that rubbish about the adolescent brain.

**Roberta :** (*As Roberta*) I think you mean hormones.

Headmaster turns, transforms into Geoff and joins the discussion.

**Phil:** It's too simplistic. (*Gives Geoff a mug*) Here you are, Geoff.

This not only elides time usefully, it also reveals the conflicts inside the school which are kept very carefully hidden in the assembly. Its obvious theatricality makes the audience less involved with the characters and encourages them to be intelligent, critical spectators. Every now and then we emphasised this relationship with the audience by having small and, we hope, entertaining moments of audience participation. Our use of the audience is a theatrical demonstration of our message: let us engage with each other, listen to each other, not set ourselves up to impose or conflict. Phil discovers how important it is to listen to kids before teaching them, to accept their creative language before sharing that of our cultural heritage. Only then can some real teaching be done.

So, we care about teachers and students and hate the system of league tables and constant testing that is imposed on both. Since we wanted to expose the absurdities of that system, a lot of the dialogue about the educational initiatives comes straight out of the government literature. Sometimes, though, it is pushed into total absurdity, just to emphasise how remote from common sense and human reality it is:

**Actor B:** (As Peter. Promoted beyond his talents, but very, very conscientious.) I would like to tell colleagues about our policy on Citizenship. We are committed to an obligation to commit ourselves to the implementation and we are ensuring that our commitment is implemented as we are obliged to.

Then there is the language of the kids. Once again, it is largely taken from real life examples. It is inventive and stylish, as Phil shows, and so close to poetry that the term "wordplay" can be applied to both. I hope we conveyed this and showed how ugly the bureaucratic language is in contrast.

So, "*dumbing down*" is not just showing you a world, it is asking you, the audience, to help change it. Near the end of Act 2 there is a long discussion between the Headmaster and Phil over how a lesson should be taught. Perhaps this is the dialectical heart of the play. It does, however, show that each character exists in a world where neither of them is free to make his own decisions. It is a good idea to examine the reasons for their different positions at the end and see how far you sympathise or agree with each of them. All of this means that you are thinking above the flow of the play rather than from within it.

**Phil:** I want students to question things, to make decisions for themselves - to love learning for its own sake. (*Beat*) I suppose that makes me a naïve idealist?

**Head:** Well, that can be a great quality at your age in a class full of stroppy kids. Meanwhile, I have to focus on the image of the school. Our exam results. Our school uniform. Our position in the League Table. These are the things that get noticed. If our image is tarnished in any way, Phil, we go under.

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**Phil** (*To Kevin*) Shakespeare has one of his characters say, "Freedom lives

hence..." (That's somewhere out there.) "...and banishment is here." And he says this because he is forced to leave his country - banished. But that's fine by him, because his country no longer stands for the things he believes in. So banishment is (in a sense) here. Do you see? (*Beat*) That's why I'm leaving.

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## QUESTION TOPICS

1. **ACTING** - We wanted to be able to change characters as if by magic, by turning round and instantly becoming someone else. It is amazing what the audience will believe if you can do this skilfully enough. So, the acting styles range from naturalistic to burlesque. Daphne and Peter are seen briefly and so the actor identifies them with a prop (e.g. fluffy pencil for Daphne) and a caricatured way of speaking.

Can you remember other single-prop-identification moments?

Daphne, cartoon like, descends into meaningless babble because her flow of jargon and instructions is so close to nonsense anyway. Phil is the "normal" character with whom the audience can identify. He engages with everyone on a straightforwardly emotional level. The Head is somewhere in between. He follows the system and this dehumanises him a little (hence his catchphrase "...in a manner of speaking"), but he is also sympathetic enough to suggest that he was once like Phil in his idealism.

2. **SOUND** - This was very important and at times integrated with the action. Actors and recorded dialogue worked together on a couple of occasions and the song accompaniments were recorded. The music was often used to comment on the situation. OFSTED, for example, was introduced using music suitable for a shoddy, commercial, talent contest. The final music extract, from Orff's *Schulwerk*, offered an ironic comment on the sad way the school system had betrayed the children. "Integrated" sound occurred for the radio in Phil's room. This was intended to set a location that we could not present visually.

What do you think the music behind Phil's first speech to the audience was meant to convey?

3. **LIGHTING** - We designed this production so that it could be taken anywhere. In a lecture theatre, for example, stage lighting may not be available. As it is we only have three lighting states:
  - a. Preset spots on the two tables along with houselights.
  - b. Overall stage area lighting.
  - c. Overall + front two rows of the audience. This helps to enhance audience involvement and indicates when they are meant to become part of the class.

Do you think the lighting could be more adventurous?

Given time for rigging and proper facilities, what else could be done?

4. **PROPS** - These are very important as there is no set. The Director wanted a consistent colour scheme where red predominated. It is in the school tie, on the folders, the staff room mugs, Geoff's pocket handkerchief, Roberta's scarf and Beckie's bag. This visual scheme presented the idea of an institution imposing conformity on everything and everyone. Phil has a dark red shirt, suggesting his eagerness to fit in at first, but his other clothes and props significantly clash with the rest.

Can you see how practical the props are for a travelling company? Comment on the use of the potted plants.

5. **COSTUMES** - The kids were created by the actor's posture and adjustments to his or her costume. Jackets were pulled off a shoulder, ties skewed, etc. Hoop earrings were used as an impactful way of identifying Beckie.

Think about the solutions to solving the problem of speed and costume change.

6. **THE USE OF THE AUDIENCE** - The actors' interaction with the audience added to the entertainment and also emphasised the contemporary/documentary nature of the play. The actors chivvying the audience back to their seats at the beginning of Act 2 is both playful and serious.

Did you find this effective?

- a. Treating the audience as kids is a way of making them think about the way we treat kids in school.

Did you observe or can you imagine any difficulties the actors might encounter when engaging directly with the audience?

7. **PERFORMANCE SPACE** - Sometimes we have been on a raised stage with a proscenium arch. This is not ideal for us, because of our need to engage with the audience. If we are playing on a flat floor with a raked audience, this works best, but we have also worked almost in the round with the audience placed in a horseshoe shape. The two tables define position and stage area. They serve a double purpose: as props tables for the actors and items on a set. The chairs also define space in a scene.

- a. *Given our relationship with the audience, can you think of any alternative uses of the space? Describe the venue. What opportunities does it offer?*

8. **INTERPRETATION** - Have a look at this extract from the play. It is a key moment in Act 1 when Phil discovers how to deal with Kevin and Beckie. He really gets their attention for the first time and becomes calmer in his approach to discipline. Do you think we achieved this sense of a shift in power when we performed it?

A mobile phone goes off. The ringing continues as the actors look around the audience to find out who

it is. Eventually Actor B (as Kevin) gets his phone out and answers it.

B: (Into phone) 'ello?

C: (As Phil) PUT IT DOWN!!

B. is shocked into paying attention for a second. C moves towards B who then backs off desperately passing through a row of the audience. Disruption is caused. A (as Beckie) joins in. Then C makes a tactical retreat to his chair and calmly waits for the disturbance to subside. He holds up a report card.

C: I've got your report card, Kevin.

B: I don't care. (Then into phone) Hang on. (He is in the auditorium R.)

C: I'll count to three. And if you don't put that down, I will report everything: the phone, the graffiti, Mr. Shaw, me.

B: I don't care.

C: One.

B: (Into phone) I'm in a lesson. I think this is the Plenary.

C: Two.

A: Kev!

C: Three.

A: Kev! You'll get expelled this time.

B: I don't care. Why should I care? I don't care!

C: (Moving towards B.) Kevin, all I ...

B: (Loudly to C. He puts the phone down involuntarily.) It's my life! You leave me alone!

Pause.

C: (Turning away and affecting indifference) OK, I will leave you alone. We'll carry on without you.

B: (Sneering, but rattled.) What about reporting me, then?

C: I don't need to. You put the phone down. (Pause) Thank you.

B. hesitates. He could raise the phone again, but waits instead.

C: (To the class) The man who wrote this poem...

B: (Raising the phone to his face. He's testing C's response.) Hello?

C: (Not rising to the wind-up. Gently warning) Kevin!

B: (After a pause) He's hung up.

C: (Pretending to believe him. Affected sympathy.) Oh! Shame.

B. smiles at C, puts phone away.

C: (Confident, now.) The man who wrote this poem....

B starts wrestling with a man in the audience. Beckie gets out her makeup.

B: (Pretends that an audience member has grabbed him) AaaaHaHa!!!

C: Kevin!! What on earth are you doing?

B: Don't worry, sir. It's just male bondage.

A: (Yells at B.) Bondin' you prat! It's male bondin'! Don't be so gay!

C: (Calmly) Hang on!

B: (Pretending to be hurt. Half yell, half laugh.) Ow!

A: Now look what you done. Me make-up's spoiled.

Meanwhile, agonised groany laughs come from B in audience.

C: (Keeping calm) Kevin! I don't think this will look good on your report.

B: Ah! (Pretend outrage) He won't let go.

C: (Banter. As if to an infant.) Just ask him nicely, then. We don't want any trouble, do we! Especially as we have an inspection coming soon.

A + B gasp and sit up. Intense silence.

B: (Releases himself and comes forward) Sir?

C: Yes, Kevin?

B: Are ya totally freakin' out 'cause of OFSTED coming?

C: Why should you think that?

A + B make a loud triumphant wailing noise to indicate they are in the know .C is amused at this and goes with the banter.

B: Are ya?

C: (Obviously not) Totally.

A & B laugh and jeer playfully. Phil has their full attention. He smiles back at them.

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## CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS:

- "The Theatre of the Oppressed" Augusto Boal (Pluto Classic)  
"Performing Brecht" Margaret Eddershaw (Routledge)  
"Another School is Possible" Terry Wrigley (Bookmarks Publications)  
"The Schools our Children Deserve" Alfie Kohn (Houghton Mifflin Co.)

## ...and SITES:

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